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Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life

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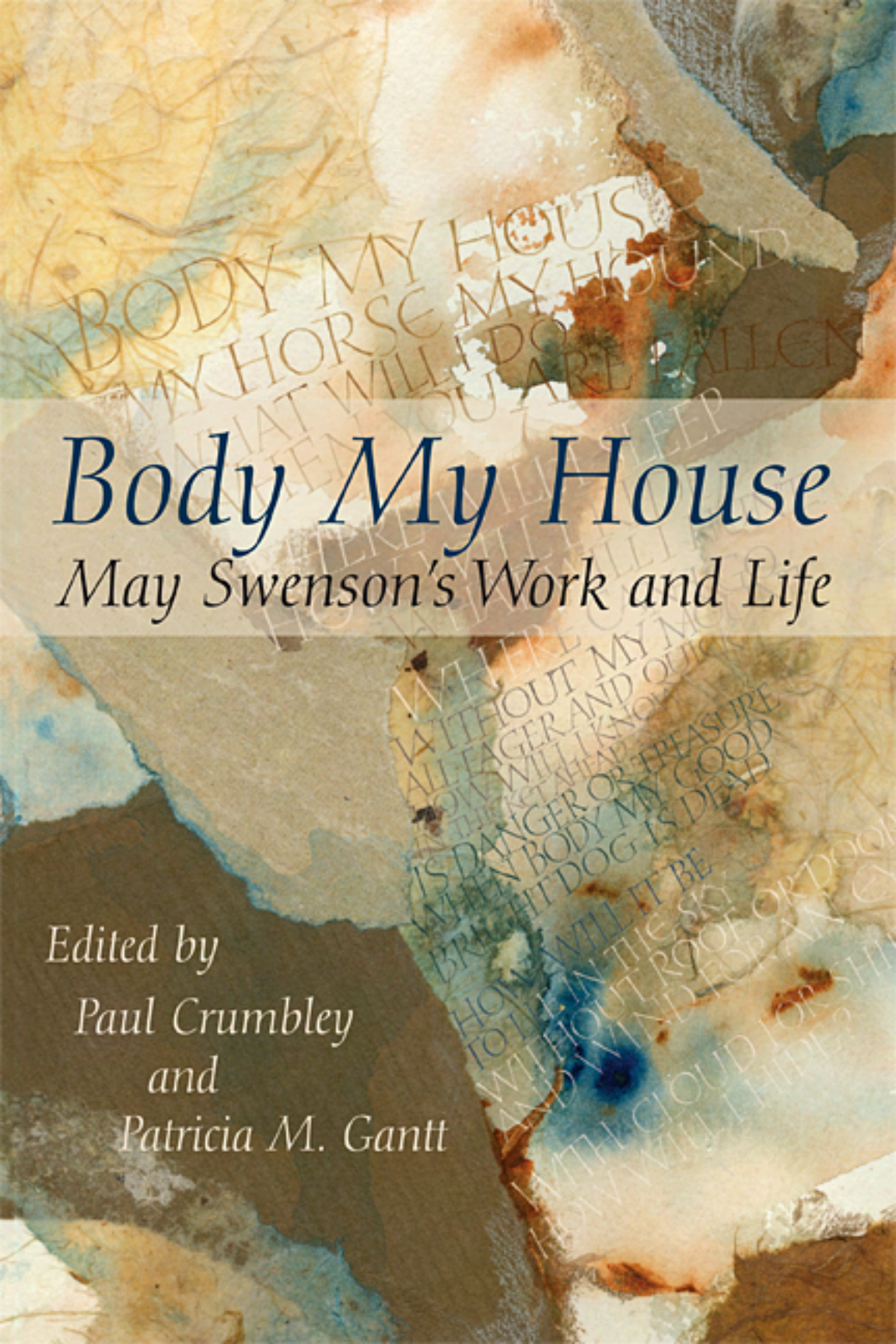
Body My House
May Swenson's Work and Life
Edited by
Paul Crumbley
and
Patricia M. Gantt

Body My House

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Utah State University Press
Logan, Utah
2006

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Roy Swenson, Ruth Eyre, Beth Hall, Margaret Woodbury, and Paul Swenson

And for

Phebe Jensen and Tom Gantt

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FOR MAY SWENSON

In some of May
the lines break,
down the middle
were legs open
to a climax,
of slickness
And I get
a willing "dildo,"
apart by a word,
I feel the poem
to make a point
in bird calls,
of wings as if
Swenson's poems,
leave a space
as if the poem
pulling the reader
"a glide
and friction."
sucked in,
ready to be blown
a riddle, a rhyme.
tighten up
then explode
feathers, a beat
all poems become
angels

Kenneth W. Brewer

Introduction

Patricia M. Gantt

The life, work, and literary reputation of poet May Swenson (1913–1989) are firmly grounded in Utah's cultural and actual soil. A deep connection exists between Swenson and the town of Logan, Utah, where she was born and reared—a connection that is apparent from her earliest poems, published in high school and university periodicals, to her more mature writing, to her request to be buried on the campus of her alma mater, Utah State University. Although Swenson spent the majority of her adult life away from her native state, she frequently returned to it for literary inspiration, whether writing about her beloved parents, the plant and animal life she observed in the area, or her deeply felt emotions. Her boundless imagination ironically led her both *to* Utah and away from it, as she sought a creative terrain where she might "become naked in poetry, / [and] force the truth / through a poem" (*Nature* 12). It is only fitting that the first collection of critical essays on Swenson and her literary universe should have its inception at her university and its press.

This collection stems from a desire to instigate a deliberate academic conversation about a poet who produced eleven books of poetry and received almost every major poetry award in the United States. Much of that initial conversation took place at a three-day symposium held at Utah State in June 2004. The May Swenson Symposium was unique in that it not only brought together scholars and poets from around the world but also included contributions from members of Swenson's family and representatives from publishing and archives. It also connected graduate and undergraduate students who were new to Swenson's poetry and interested community members who simply wanted to know more about a writer often spoken of as a "poet's poet."

Discussions during the symposium centered on the range of Swenson's literary corpus and the scholarly approaches to it. Sessions particularly focused on her work as a nature writer; the literary and social contexts for her writing; her national and international acclaim, including her work as a translator; her associations with other poets and writers; her creative process; and her profound explorations of issues of gender and sexuality. The book you hold in your hands, however, is much more than a volume of proceedings from that symposium. Although it does contain concepts from presentations given there, it also includes ideas expanded beyond the conference format, as well as further critical work emerging for the first time.

"Body My House": May Swenson's Work and Life is the product of an ongoing, international fascination with the poetic achievement of one of America's most skillful and compelling writers. It includes references to a wide range of Swenson manuscripts—published and unpublished poems, letters, diaries, and additional prose—some of which has not been available before.

Essays in this collection are grouped sequentially, without formal divisions, in three sets: those drawn from Swenson's life by people who knew her very well, both as person and poet; those that connect Swenson's work with that of other poets like Walt Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop; and those that investigate the poetics evident in Swenson's writing. As editors, we hope that the conversation about Swenson's poems begun here will be a useful, dynamic one that will grow to explore even more of her writing.

The first two essays, "The Love Poems and Letters of May Swenson" and "A Figure in the Tapestry: The Poet's Feeling Runs Ahead of Her Imagination (Greenwich Village, 1949–50)," are analyses by R. R. Knudson, Swenson's partner and literary executor, and Paul Swenson, the poet's brother. Knudson refers to May Swenson as one of many poets she "dote[s] on" and investigates Swenson's writing about her numerous loves, from the "powerful . . . and protective force" of her parents' love, to an appreciation for "a deep blue shock of shade" observed one afternoon. Knudson celebrates what she calls Swenson's "own authentic voice, her instinctual feelings, her keenness of perception, her amazing variety of subjects, her cosmos both accessible and elusive." Paul Swenson draws his analysis from an unpublished 1949 diary his sister kept, calling its lines representative of her poetry in "their honesty, self-irony, and clear-eyed evaluation of her personal and professional circumstances." The subject of much of the diary is the relationship between May Swenson and Pearl

Schwartz, one marked by an intensity expressed in unambiguous sensual terms, a love that fueled their almost two decades together.

The next group of essays begins with a chapter by Alicia Ostriker, one of three major American poets and critics whose work is included in this volume. Ostriker points to a systemic link between Swenson and Walt Whitman, whose particular definition of liberty—"absence of constraint"—she believes the poets share:

> [I]n Swenson as in Whitman we have a poet of democratic vision and vista, a poet of inclusiveness not exclusiveness, for whom all natural phenomena are equally eligible for celebration and all levels and layers of language are equally delectable, a poet who is always surprising, who is not *literary*, not *fashionable*, who belongs to no school . . . and doesn't need to show off how learned she is, or to condescend, or to be superior, or on the other hand to polemicize—a poet as fresh as fresh milk and as sound as an egg.

As her title "May Swenson: Whitman's Daughter" suggests, Ostriker explores the "corollary of eroticism" found in both poets' work, particularly in the complexities contained in Swenson's commingling of nature and human passion.

Kirstin Hotelling Zona's "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" investigates the connection between the two poets, whose professional relationship began at Yaddo in 1950 and continued until Bishop's death in 1979. The relationship resulted in close to three hundred letters and is the subject of *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, to which Zona contributed an afterword. Drawing primarily on letters exchanged between Swenson and Bishop, Zona focuses on the poets' important gifts of perceptivity, the "slides . . . from honesty to . . . beneath-the-surface subtlety" that the two exhibit in their writing, whether in poetry or prose. Like Ostriker, Zona concerns herself with tracing Swenson's influences but is more interested in exploring what she calls the "palpable caginess" of Swenson's implicitly sexual lines.

In "De-Cartesianizing the Universe: May Swenson's Design of Wor(l)ds," Gudrun M. Grabher extends the realm of exploration of Swenson's poetry to articulate a Swensonian "epistemological approach to the universe." Positing that poetry, rather than Mormonism, became Swenson's true religion, Grabher considers Swenson's poems to be prayers—almost godlike efforts "to create, to constitute, to call into being." Analyzing Swenson work across several decades, Grabher interprets Swenson's

numerous attempts to attain a reality that is "not something static but dynamic and organic." Grabher is also interested in Swenson's use of the physical page, her frequent splits between words and stanzas forming a threaded bridge between the world as seen and the world as necessarily unattainable mystery, "between I and you, I and the universe."

The final half-dozen chapters deal explicitly with Swenson's poetics—her demonstrable art of creation. Martha Nell Smith's "'That Never Told CAN Be': May Swenson's Manuscript Witnesses" investigates what she has learned from the poet's commentary on her poetry, as well as from the poems themselves. In both, Smith finds what she identifies as a "powerful testament . . . to [Swenson's] commitment to the truth." She concentrates on "That Never Told Can Be," a poem whose title comes from a line by William Blake, noting Swenson's fascination with Blake's work as a natural connection between poets who were "keen observer[s]" and whose "astonishing lyrics are deceptively simple." Smith argues that for Swenson writing is never merely a means of capturing a particular subject but also a struggle to capture language itself.

Like Smith, poet and critic Cynthia Hogue explores Swenson's selection of lines—even actual words—that allow her to alter what is "hidden in plain sight," her sexuality. Viewing "lesbian (in)visibility" as "a problem as well as a choice," Hogue analyzes Swenson's poetry, including the often anthologized "The Centaur," as a means of "altering the inherited standard of vision," a playful re-visioning of "hybrid identity" that "anticipates postmodern reconfigurations of agency and [liberates] new subjectivities." Hogue further asserts that in poems like "The Cross Spider" and "Shuttles," Swenson employs "wit to serious purpose, countering assumptions that linguistic play is all surface-dazzle with no depth," asking her audience to challenge its own cultural assumptions about progress, sexuality, and mortality. Hogue concludes that Swenson's poetry, though highly evocative and provoking, is less about how we imagine ideas than about the use of language.

Paul Crumbley's "May Swenson and Other Animals: Her Poetics of Natural Selection" finds its source in the poet's frequent writings about animals, especially those poems in which she configures the speakers as "fellow members of an ever-evolving natural world." Swenson's poetic self-image, according to Crumbley, defies stasis but becomes increasingly edgy and animalistic in the sense of freedom and openness, as it reveals Swenson's own expressed duality as person and animal. Treating a range of Swenson poems across the decades, Crumbley shows us a writer daring to communicate "her loving embrace of the animal in herself" in a further deliberate attack on "conceptual barriers of all sorts."

Michael Spooner brings multiple perspectives to Swenson studies in "How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson's Theory of Writing." Spooner is the director of the Utah State University Press, which yearly confers the May Swenson Prize on an outstanding book of poems by an emerging author; in addition, he is a writer himself and a close follower of Swenson's work. As Spooner affirms, Swenson had no desire to be considered a writing theorist, yet her composing process is evident in a variety of materials she has left behind—recordings of the poet reading her work, a line drawing in which she depicts herself as circles and squares, numerous interviews and letters, and of course her poems. Through what both Swenson and Spooner term iconographic poetry, Swenson reveals a "confident modernism," as well as a decidedly avant-garde wish to present both received and achieved wisdom by "loosening the hold of syntax on the word." Spooner notes the clean precision present in her language: "She sharpens our perception of the nonphysical by bringing the physical so sharply to our senses—in her own terms."

Suzanne Juhasz's "The Queer Poetics of May Swenson" challenges the reader to embrace Swenson's "unconventional representations of gender, sexuality, and desire"; rejecting derogatory notions of *queer*, Juhasz recasts the word "as a tool to question and disarrange normative systems of behavior and identity in our culture." This is the "queering" she sees in Swenson's poetry—expressions of fluidity and change rather than sterile depictions of gender roles such as male as active and female as passive. Concerned most with those poems that explore identity formation, Juhasz treats Swenson's nature poems and love poems and looks with a keen eye at metaphors that blur normative distinctions and ask us to think in fresh ways.

Mark Doty's concluding chapter, "'Question' and More Questions: Two Shells for May Swenson," shows both the poet and the critic at work. Taking the southern barrier island where he is presently living as a starting point for his investigation of Swenson's poetry, Doty crafts a lyrical depiction of a shell: "The whole thing resembles some strange Victorian hatpin, or a Viennese art nouveau tree, or what would have resulted if Rodin had sculpted Loie Fuller dancing in her veils." Doty's desire to attend to each detail of the shell leads him to a consideration of Swenson's "Question," with its image of the body as house, horse, and dog. He looks at each of these intriguing metaphors, giving no answer but asking a series of questions about Swenson's "deep question fueling the poem," namely: "If the self is something housed in the body, clothed by it, what will it mean for us to be free of such disguise and restraint?" Moving on to "Little

Lion Face," Doty delves into Swenson's poetic investiture of pure Eros in the dandelion, which becomes her metaphor for human sensuality.

In "The Wonderful Pen," May Swenson invites her poetic audience to "Read me. Read my mind." As editors, we hope that this volume will lead our readers not only to a greater understanding of Swenson's poetry and poetics, but to a reading—or rereading—of the poems themselves. Her work is ripe for further discovery. This volume provides only an introduction to the multifaceted literary life of an important twentieth-century American woman and writer whose work is now beginning to attract the significant scholarly attention that has long been its due.

May Swenson Chronology

Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt

May 28, 1913: Anna Thilda May Swenson, daughter of Dan Arthur and Margaret Hellberg Swenson, is born at 2:30 AM Wednesday at a house rented on North Seventh Street in Logan, Utah. May will be the oldest of ten children.

1922: May's family moves to a house her father built at 669 East 500 North in Logan. The grounds behind the house will become the setting for the poem "The Centaur." The house is situated at the foot of Old Main Hill, where the main buildings of Utah State Agricultural College are located; there, May's father is a faculty member in the Department of Mechanical Arts.

1929: Swenson wins the Vernon Short Story Medal and twenty-five dollars for her writing at Logan High School and publishes her first literary work, "Christmas Day," in *The Grizzly*, the school newspaper.

1930–34: Swenson attends Utah State Agricultural College, where she publishes her first poem in *The Scribble*, the campus literary magazine. She also writes for the campus newspaper, *Student Life*. She graduates as an English major with a minor in art.

1936: Swenson leaves Utah to join the New York literary scene.

1938–39: Swenson works as an interviewer for the Living Lore Unit of the WPA Federal Writers' Project.

1949: Swenson's poem "Haymaking" is accepted for publication in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, providing entry into prestigious journals and magazines.

1950: Swenson meets Elizabeth Bishop at Yaddo, which marks the beginning of their friendship and years of correspondence regarding poetics.

1953: Howard Moss accepts Swenson's poem "By Morning" for publication in the *New Yorker*, changing the title to "Snow by Morning" and paying Swenson forty-nine dollars. Swenson will go on to publish fifty-nine poems in the *New Yorker*.

1953: Swenson is awarded the Introduction Prize of the Poetry Center of the New York City YM/YWCA.

1954: Swenson publishes her first book, *Another Animal: Poems*, with Charles Scribner's Sons.
1955: Swenson wins a Rockefeller Writing Fellowship.
1958: Swenson publishes *A Cage of Spines* with Rinehart. She wins the William Rose Benet Poetry Prize of the Poetry Society of America.
1959: Swenson is awarded the Longview Foundation Prize and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Grant.
1960: Swenson is awarded an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant.
1963: Swenson publishes *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems* with Scribner's.
1964: Swenson is awarded the Ford Foundation Grant for Poets and Writers Combined with Theater Group, enabling her to write *The Floor*, a one-act play presented at the American Place Theatre in 1965–66 and published in the summer of 1967 in *First Stage*.
1966: Swenson publishes *Poems to Solve* with Scribner's.
1967: Swenson publishes *Half Sun Half Sleep* with Scribner's. She is awarded a Utah State University Distinguished Service Gold Medal, a Rockefeller Foundation Grant, and a Brandeis University Creative Arts Award.
1968: Swenson wins the Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America.
1969: Swenson receives an Academy of American Poets Fellowship.
1970: Swenson publishes *Iconographs: Poems* with Scribner's. *Iconographs* is listed as one of the "50 Books of the Year" distinguished by the American Institute of Graphic Arts.
1971: Swenson publishes *More Poems to Solve* with Scribner's.
1972: Swenson publishes *Windows & Stones: Selected Poems of Tomas Tranströmer*, translated from his works in Swedish, with the University of Pittsburgh Press. She wins the International Poetry Forum Medal.
1974: Swenson wins a National Endowments for the Arts Award.
1976: Swenson publishes *The Guess & Spell Coloring Book* with Scribner's.
1978: Swenson publishes *New & Selected Things Taking Place* with Little, Brown.
1981: Swenson receives the Bollingen Award (shared with Howard Nemerov).
1980: Swenson is appointed chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She will hold this post until her death in 1989.
1983: Swenson receives the Golden Rose of the New England Poetry Club.
1987: Swenson publishes *In Other Words: New Poems* with Alfred Knopf. She receives an honorary Ph.D. in literature from Utah State University, Utah State University's Centennial Award, and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in the amount of $380,000.
1988: Swenson is named a "Literary Lion" of the New York Public Library.

1989: Swenson dies of a heart attack on Saturday, December 4, in Ocean View, Delaware. Services are held in the Logan, Utah, at the 18th Ward Chapel on December 9 at noon.
1991: *The Love Poems* is published posthumously by Houghton Mifflin.
1993: *The Complete Poems to Solve* is published by Macmillan Publishing Company.
1994: *Nature: Poems Old and New* is published by Houghton Mifflin.
1996: *May Out West* is published by Utah State University Press.
1998: *Made with Words*, a collection of interview transcripts and writing by Swenson, edited by Gardner McFall, is published by the University of Michigan Press.
2001: *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop* is published by Utah State University Press.
2003: *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*, a revised version of *The Love Poems*, is published with a foreword by Maxine Kumin.
2005: The Beauford Delaney portrait of Swenson is acquired for display in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

The Love Poems and Letters of May Swenson

R. R. Knudson

I am a fan of May Swenson's poetry. A *fan*. She's my favorite poet of many I dote on and I will tell you why right up front. I love her authentic voice, her instinctual feelings, her keenness of perception, her amazing variety of subjects, her cosmos both accessible and elusive. I love that she stayed away from poetry fashions of her time, that her poems can't be crammed into a category, that she founded no movement and has no disciples, that she won a devoted audience without being in the academy or any other establishment, that she was a popular success earning a modest living by writing: publishing in magazines, finding publishing houses and admiring editors for her collections, and making her way into dozens, then hundreds, now thousands of others' collections: for example, she appears in textbooks designed for students from kindergarten through graduate school *and* their teachers; anthologies of poems for general readers; recipe books, medical books, how-to and self-help books; and prefaces and epigraphs for novels. Her poems have been set to music by more than fifty contemporary composers.[1] I know these songs; I know the radio broadcasts and TV scripts; I know the baseball programs, the calendar captions, the greeting cards, and other reprints, because I have, since May's death, granted these rights on her poems.

I am the owner of more than nine hundred poems and prose pieces that May thought of as her children. Few weeks pass without requests for "Analysis of Baseball," "Bleeding," "Cat and the Weather," "The Cloud Mobile," "The Centaur," "Feel Me," "Forest," "How Everything Happens,"

1. This list is derived from critical articles about May, from reviews of her books, and from conversations with May about her work.

"How to Be Old," "The James Bond Movie," "July 4th," "God's | Children," "The Key to Everything," "Living Tenderly," "Mornings Innocent," "The Pregnant Dream," "Snow in New York," "Southbound on the Freeway," "The Surface," "To Make a Play," "The Universe," "Women," "Working on Wall Street," to name some of her most oft-printed poems. Numerous others are active, and I'm astonished by the selections. For example, not long ago at Carnegie Hall I heard Marilyn Horne sing a setting of May's "Digital Wonder Watch" by the composer William Bolcom.

As May writes in "By Morning," there is "Something for everyone / plenty / and more coming."

In the last fourteen years, I have overseen the publication of more than one hundred poems that May left unpublished in the folders she had titled "Working." When editors such as Peter Davison, Sandy McClatchy, Grace Schulman, and Herb Liebowitz have asked me for "something by May," I've read poems from these folders at random and chosen those that *I* liked and that seemed to make Swenson sense, even if unfinished. I've placed many other "Working" poems in the six Swenson collections published since 1991 and in the two Swenson biographies I've written. Then, this past winter, I gathered all of the remaining unpublished drafts, bound Xerox copies of them in Kinko blue, and sent the originals to the Swenson archive at Washington University: 250 more children of hers.

May loved to write. She seemed happiest with a pencil in her hand. One of the first letters May Swenson wrote to me, dated April 4, 1967, was a draft of her poem "Wednesday at the Waldorf." It followed a visit we'd made to an aquarium in Brooklyn and later to breakfast at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

> Two white whales have been installed at
> the Waldorf. They are tumbling slowly
> above the tables, butting the chandeliers,
> submerging, and taking soft bites
> out of the red-vested waiters in the
> Peacock Room. They are poking *fleur-de-lys*
> tails into the long pockets on the
> waiters' thighs. They are stealing
> breakfast strawberries from two eccentric
> guests—one, skunk-cabbage green with
> dark peepers—the other, wild rose and
> milkweed, barelegged, in Lafayette loafers.
> When the two guests enter the elevator,

the whales ascend, bouncing, through all
the ceilings, to the sixth floor. They
get between the sheets. There they turn
candy-pink, with sky-colored eyes, and
silver bubbles start to rise from velvet
navels on the tops of their own heads.
Later, a pale blue VW, running on poetry,
weaves down Park Avenue, past yellow
sprouts of forsythia, which, due to dog-do
and dew, are doing nicely. The two
white whales have the blue car in tow
on a swaying chain of bubbles. They are
rising toward the heliport on the Pan Am
roof. There they go, dirigible and slow,
hide-swiping each other, lily tails flipping,
their square velvet snouts stitched with
snug smiles. It is April. "There's
a kind of a hush all over the world."

At the end of this letter, May added, "Imagine reading this poem in the *New Yorker* not knowing anything about it. . . . It's not done yet—but almost. If it's no good, tell me, and never mind."

May sent me other poems in letters over the years. Most of these have been published, except this about a household chore:

What could be dumber
Than waiting for the plumber
Why doesn't he call, at least
He's got my nummer?

And this limerick, when I'd complained in a letter to her about menstrual cramps:

After grunts and groans myriad
a period was placed by *my* period.
I'm glad that it was
simply because
of this nuisance I had become wearied.

And this, which May titled "Poems with Plot and Action," because I'd noted that her poems lacked a story line (at that time I was under the spell of Tennyson):

Once there was someone named Zan
always ended what she began
She could cook but not sew
and ski like a pro . . .
she was both Babe & Tarzan . . .

I won't go on for the next twenty-four lines of extolment, still with no plot.

Tarzan aside, as well as the poems you will encounter in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*, the dearest loves of May's life were elsewhere, loves that are the deepest roots of her creative vision. The taproot was her parents. Their letters to May and hers to them are filled with caring: "Darling daughter May," a usual opening, "with love, admiration, and appreciation," or "Lots of love from your old dad," their closings.

Her mother writes from Logan: "I have thought of you continually while reading your new book and in my prayers daily. Congratulations to you, my famous daughter." And from Sweden: "I arrived here in my hometown where I was born 75 years ago. What a surprise. I got your letter. It made me so happy." May answered her mother with these words: "Thank you for your sweet and wonderful letters. I long to see your handwriting. I love you so much." In another letter May sent her mother this poem, which her mother published in *The Relief Society Magazine* of the Mormon Church:

Her Hands

The hands that set wisdom into books,
Or capture beauty with a brush
Are not so eloquent by far
As a mother's fingers are.

For it is wonderful to think
Her hands must leave their work
Of wash and cook and mend for ten,
To get the ink and hunt the pen. . . .

The hands that still the babe to sleep,
That knead the bread, that turn the seam,
That rest at night upon the quilt
The wedding ring agleam;

The hands so veined and creased with toil,
Now raised in joy, now clenched in fear,

> Now shadowing the eyes to pray—
> These hands took up the pen today
>
> And wrote "Dear Daughter" on a page.
> That made a masterpiece of love,
> More memorial, more supreme,
> Than any artist's dream.

And this thank-you letter for a book May's mother sent to her:

> I am going to read your book 'Introduction to the Gospel,' Mother. In Chapter 1, I like the definition of "humility." It's one I agree with: "an attitude of open-mindedness, a childlike curiosity about things, a search for knowledge and understanding"—in other words, "Don't feel you already know everything. . . ." And if there is a basic and eternal truth, it is . . . [here:] "Love"—which "is the great principle of life, the first commandment—the heart of all religion and life." I certainly agree [with that]. The love that was planted in me by my parents ever since my birth—even before birth—and which continued to be exemplified by you and Dad, generously spread among us brothers and sisters, and which is now passed on in a widening stream to your children's children, is a powerful . . . and protective force. I do realize my great luck in being born to you and Dad, in receiving such a legacy.

May's letters to her father seem to me to be especially luscious with love and respect. Here, she strives flat out to explain herself. Dropping her characteristic masks and her craft in favor of some studied prose, she writes, in 1951:

> I'm sending you a copy of a poetry magazine that just came out, with a poem of mine in it—you may have seen this one in manuscript, but here it is in print. I often wonder and have doubts about whether what I write has any significance for you. I don't imagine it does—for your life is so full and active that you have no need for the playthings of art. Your creative urge is spent directly in living—in shaping people through your influence, in cultivating growing things—not in trying to capture sensations through the medium of art. The word "art" is contained in the word "artificial,"

> the opposite of natural. Well, it is that—it is a sort of opposite of life—a sort of rebellion against life perhaps, or an attempt to control or equal it with a synthetic creation of one's own, rather than riding with life, giving in to it, immersing oneself in it, and resigning oneself to being but a particle in a process. Art grows out of individual arrogance, I suppose. Here I am admitting it's questionable.

Another letter dated 1951 is just as revealing:

> Dad, I expect you sometimes wonder about me and perhaps feel pain at the fact that I seem "outside the fold"—not only in that I have spent so many years at a distance from home, but that my beliefs and attitudes seem different from most of the rest of the family. I want to point to the fact that this seeming separation, or opposition, is actually not the case—that, in fact, it proves my likeness to you and mother and my comparison with you (at least psychologically)—for just as you and mother were not content with inherited knowledge and belief, with the traditional way of life of your parents and ancestors and felt the need to find a new faith and even a new land for yourselves, I had this same impulse. It is a healthy impulse—it is really the evolutionary impulse itself at its root, which accounts for all progress (for decay as well, perhaps)—let us say, for *change*, which is the dynamics of life. I do not know whether I am making a big circle with my life (I hope it is not a zero!) simply in order to arrive, in the end, where I started—but even if this turns out to be the case the journey would not be entirely foolish because every sensitive human being is confronted with the necessity of learning by himself, of discovering through experience, and is simply incapable of taking his course in life for granted as pointed out by parents or others in authority—just as there are many human beings, more docile, who are incapable of taking any other course than that recommended by the majority around them.
>
> Well, I didn't mean to get on like this, and it sounds like some kind of defense, but it is just the impulse to talk things over with you that I get quite often but usually squelch for fear of being misconstrued, or at other times because I decide it isn't necessary—you have faith in me and love and trust me, as I do you.

Years later May sent her dad a poem, left unpublished, that's just as direct. She says, "Dear Dad, I'm always with you in my thoughts and I wrote this poem about me and you. I hope it can convey a little of what you mean to me."

The Seed of My Father

I rode on his shoulder. He showed me the moon.
He told me its name with a kiss in my ear.
"My moon," I said. "Yours," he agreed.
And as we walked, it followed us home.

Holding my hand, he showed me a tree,
and picked a peach, and let me hold it.
I took a bite, then he took a bite.
"Ours?" I asked. "Yes, our tree."
Then with a hoe he made the water flow beside it.
……..……
He made a garden, and he planted me.
Sun and moon he named and deeded to me.
Water and fire he created, created me,
he named me into being: I am the seed of my father.

His breath he gave me, he gave me night and day.
His universe is in me fashioned from his clay.
I feed on the juice of the peach from his eternal tree.
Each poem I plant is a seedling from that tree.
I plant the seed of my father.

Her love for her parents—what could be more obvious? Born into a family impervious to hate, nourished from day one by a father's connection to natural things and by a mother whose optimistic spirit and ardor for Mormon Gospel touched every daily act, May grew to write with romantic energy spread over her entire universe of suns, moons, planets, seasons, water, fire, gardens, animals—and, yes, friends, editors, and even other poets.

And here are some examples from her unpublished poems.

Oblong Afternoons

I would make with paint
and set in a frame

the oblong afternoons of summer
in the stupefying weather

I would lay thick with scalpel
how apple boughs float
foundering skiffs
in moody orchards

Waxen apple sheen
poplar sheen
dark sheen of asphalt
I'd make a suave brush

In obtuse sky
how the sun is fat
I'd stab an ochre dob [*sic*]
and in the porches
of square spinning houses
fix a deep blue shock of shade
[1934]

He

[also called "Lord Sun"]

Came back one day in the fall
We thought he'd gone for good
to the old man's home of winter
the clouds had hung so long
like gray beards in the sky

The squirrel had prepared for cold
the crow for snow with his scolding cry
and we had prepared for dark
to fall early on the park
with the shutting of summer's gate
prepared the proxy log for fire
stabled in the grate

The crow with his scolding cry
had prepared us for dark and cold
and the shutting of summer's eye.

Then one morning like June as bold
ruddy in all his brawn
there he was in the park
throwing diamonds on the lawn

He stroked each mossy mournful rock
like an old dog's head
and turned the fountain's snuffling
into giggles instead
He made the crickets tune their shins
like mad Hungarian violins

He unbuttoned the roses
as if they were blouses
made them expose chill nipples to the bees
The wasps we thought were dead
brown corpses on the sill
woke snorting from their trance and spun
in the gilded circus of the sun
[1951, at Yaddo]

[Six Amputated Roses]

Six amputated roses red and white
elected to this bouquet upon the table
particularized this way we do expect
something special from their chilly heads
so singular and shut stubborn as love

Snidely closed these opium bowls
secret sensuous for all their velvet looks
To get at the double dewdrops
in their buds beauty and truth
shall we bite them from their stems
and swallow whole?

How upset we are next day to find the arrangement
changed the still-life something else
it's multiplied
The same six red and white have
opened their faces

lips within scalloped lips appear
Effusive now and sparkling with confessions
the goblets grown so wide
why will not the mystery not spill out
Farther inside
[1950s]

On a Cushion

In midnight stream a stuffed upholstered stag
stands stirring starry ripples, his antlers glow
frosty on arctic sky where gold and crimson names
outflame aurora. An emerald wreath of leaves
with spangled veins, enhalos the noble scene
which, scarlet-backed, gilt-tassled, framed
in gilded braid, is sewn on softest velvet—
it seems—until my cheek I let recline
on the plump pneumatic belly of the stag (or moose?)
—Oh, jagged stings! Like staples punching in!—
Or like gravel and burrs they scrape harsh my skin.
All bristle is the stag (or elk?)—an angry welt
I got from its splendid pelt. But Lethbridge
recollections, sweet, ooze from the Brillo
pillow where's stenciled the stag (or moose? or elk?)
in midnight stream, stuck all four feet.
[1970]

In Iowa: A Primitive Painting

Put carnations behind the ears
of cows, the black and blond and brown
munching while hardly moving
on mats of green. Four-legged furniture
of the fields, full bags of nourishment
and comfort hanging down
polish of the morning sunlight
on warm sides. They are the mother-
beasts, the stolid and innocent ones
and we the babes that feed on them.
From the car coasting 80 West

I reach a long arm out to put red
carnations behind all the black
and blond and brown wagging ears
of cows that munch
while hardly moving on slopes,
in hollows of green.
[1970s]

The Waves Are Making Waves

The waves are making waves,
it is their work to make
themselves, to gather white
on the ridges, rush to sand,
to reap white, heap white, spill
over racing ledges on roughs
where wild whites churn.
In the ruts the waves make
white run over white, it is
their work to run, to earn
wind's wage, tide's full work done.
[Circa January 1970]

Her Management 2

She can't compose two things
alike: every pebble on the beach,
every pit within a peach
is singular; the rings
within a tree
fail at symmetry.

I look at my toe:
there's not another, I know,
to match it. See this ear?
Its twin is only near-
ly like it. That wave,
the dark concave

underneath its hurl,
reoccurs, a different curl.

In her spontaneous script
the penmanship is tipped
to a new slant at each next
line, although the text

repeats. Yet she can't refrain
from duplications—like the rain—
imitative every drop;
she writes the rain and can't stop
because she can't make
a perfect pair

of tears, of whorls of hair,
of circles on a lake
of shadows or of leaves
or sleeves
for the ripe
corn. She can't shape

a spot of sunlight or a grape
of the same stripe
as the one beside it or copy
a single bee. "Daisy, daisy,"
she scribbles all
summer in loops and rounds unidentical.

She tries to rhyme, let's say,
a school of clouds, a wild bouquet
of flames, a scarf of birds:
they bolt into disorder,
explosive words
on pages without a border.

Ignorant of measure,
she can't compose a square;
her book:
a crook-
ed treasure,
published everywhere.
[Summer 1957]

To D.H. Lawrence

You are dead, Lawrence.
No, how can this be—?
Not when the best of you is here
with me.

The very best of you
the essential tear
loosed from your eye's brink
has fallen here.

The one most reddest blood drop
that which stood
at your heart's edge
has come to good wells
and now distends the vein
of my lush passion
and is moist again.

Come dear, I give you dwelling,
your shade is not astray,
alert and compelling
climb up in me and sway.

Fasten here the lute's string
that quivers alone
though the lute be crumbled
the plucking finger gone.
[1936]

Walking with Louis

I remember walking in Central Park
with Louis. This was a long time ago.

We'd bumped into each other on 59th
Street, I think. It was a sunny day.

We waded through the pigeons on the
hexagonal tiles, between the rows

of old benches full of Sunday sitters.

We wandered around the zoo.

Louis did the talking, mostly in puns.
We laughed a lot. I remember my elation

at walking next to such a famous man.
Louis had put some poems of mine into

an anthology named "A Treasury of Great
Poems." I was thrilled at the implication.

Moreover, among the "S"s in the Index
I stood next to Swinburne! And Louis

said I seemed to have issued out of
D. H. Lawrence and Emily Dickinson. (What

a fox he is!) The beautiful thing
about Louis is—*still is*—that

meeting him always makes you feel good.
That bubbling spring of wisdom

and humor, let it not cease. In fact,
let it increase. If possible.

On the day the world explodes (if it
does) I'd like to be standing next to

Louis. Whatever he'd say would be so
true and funny I'd forget to be scared.

[1950s. Note: The "Louis" referred to here is Louis Untermeyer.]

YOU SHELTONS AND

lots like you out
there we like you
a lot You are the
sweet of the earth
not the salt Salt
is what cattle lick
what's put into
wounds by hate Hate
having wounded

Salt's cheap maybe
necessary abrasive
but sweet is rare
rare as what it
feeds Luxurious
bees their sipping
places hard to find
here It's hard to
blossom in Stony-
ville sting of
salt everywhere
Sweet of the earth
air sunlight rare
Out there you
people not salt
not like Lot's
wife Lots of you
the sweet of the
earth out there we
like you a lot

[1960s. Note: May sent this poem as a thank you for her stay at Poets' House at the University of Arizona in Tucson.]

One of the last of May's twenty cat poems:

How Could We Leave You?

[1] How could we leave you, Boa? Yet we did. You came to us in the summer, and now we must go. You were reluctant to come in, and now it's winter, you won't go out. And we must go to seek summer, Boa. You're not our cat, but this is your house. Will you freeze and starve? Or go with the coons, learn their trails of scavenge? I fixed a nest with my old sweater in the shed out back, where the gas meter is—door open a crack. Maybe you'll curl in there, out of the sleet and wind.
Our boa, symmetrically striped, slinky, long-legged, who brought the water rat to our door—who crippled a bluejay, springing on it from under the hedge. . . . You had a flea collar on, we hoped you belonged to a neighbor. We went away for two weeks once, and when we came back, 3 a.m. on a dark, windy night, there you were, sitting on the gate—thin, bedraggled, a wound half-healed in

your cheek, some dog's mean doing. But dogs will be dogs.
You forgave us the moment you heard the Friskies rattle in the box.

But now, it's November. We must migrate. We can't stay longer
in our chilly summer house. *Your* house, that you adopted. How
can we leave you here? Yet, here you belong. The pipes are being
drained. The plumber says you'll be O.K. "Cats are smart—
she'll wander round and find a home." The Animal Rescue would cage
you for a week, then put you under. None of our friends can take you.
We can't take you. To California! Nor would you go. This is your
house. You sit on the gate. You watch us leave. We climb into
the car. The mailman comes by. He waves. You canter up the steps.
And we leave. How can we leave you, Boa? We leave.

[2] And it is the next day, and we are far away, in Tennessee. The radio
says it snowed in the northeast, and froze in the night.
Behind the fan of the heater in this motel beside the highway,
here in bed I seem to hear your morning cry, Boa.
What does it mean that we love animals? Their beauty, that is
unconscious. Their body that is warm, and asks only a stroke now and
then. Their simplicity. Their mystery, for they apprehend without
words. Their existence within the moment. And that they are without
taint, and full of trust.

When you roll over, Boa, your silky belly is angel-soft. You crouch
on grips of your claws, your back dark, marked like a snake.
You are Highness, Boa, you are Sphinx. And you can be baby-cute.
You'll leap into a lap through the narrowest gap, accurately,
your weight unfelt, and tuck your face into an armpit, and purr.
How could I leave you, Boa? But we are gone.
[Begun in Arlington, Virginia, on November 24, 1975]

A Figure in the Tapestry

The Poet's Feeling Runs Ahead of Her Imagination (Greenwich Village, 1949–50)

Paul Swenson

In an unpublished diary May Swenson kept in typed and handwritten fragments during 1949 and 1950, she wrote, soon after she met and fell in love with her longtime companion Pearl Schwartz:

> What is the most important thing now? It is Monday night, November 21. In one month I will be in Utah. In two months, I will be back in New York. Then I will have to be responsible again.
>
> During those two months I have very few obligations. One is to get a book together and submit it to *New Directions* or other publisher. One is to send out single poems to editors. One is to train the dog. One is Christmas presents for those I presumably love. One (this is the most important) is to create a new poem.
>
> And with these few obligations, I have the obligation to be a loveable person. We made love today. How much pretense is there in her? That is not a fair question and it does not matter. Don't ask useless questions. Be a person and all else will follow. Don't sit back and wait for things to happen. Go out and make them happen. O, lucky to have a flat belly full, to be evergreen. To be warm and to be aware, to have not yet met death. So, be happy you fool.

In their honesty, self-irony, and clear-eyed evaluation of the poet's personal and professional circumstances, these few spare and direct lines from

that diary manuscript are characteristic of the openness of May Swenson's writing, both in her poetry and her prose. They combine to create a snapshot of her thoughts as she crossed the threshold of a fertile creative crescent in which many of her most evocative love poems would emerge, as well as a broad variety of other work that would appear in her first book, *Another Animal*, published in 1954.

In a broad sense this paper derives from diary materials entrusted to me in 2002 by Pearl Schwartz, Swenson's second of three companions, and from telephone interviews I conducted with her in May 2004. My wife Leanna Rae Scott and I spent the night with Schwartz in her Greenwich Village apartment in New York, in October 2001, our second visit in two years. She presented me with the manuscript at that time.

Much of the writing in the diary is ardent—voluptuous, sensual, and intensely felt. While the careful observer may absorb the brilliance and vibrancy of the manuscript's imagery, its immediacy, its probing self-analysis, and its unwavering integrity, one may also at times be in danger of drowning in its often unpunctuated prose. It was during this time that Swenson was experimenting with little or no punctuation in both poetry and prose.

This paper will only hint at the material's depth and complexity. While the poet's introspective account of the period describes unimaginable heights of ecstasy and joy, it also plumbs moments of self-doubt, confusion, and despair. I find I can read it only in short bursts, given its powerful personal impact. This is particularly true for me because of the admiration and identification I retain for the person I perceive my sister to be. My intention is to treat the material with interest, appreciation, and respect.

When Pearl Schwartz and May Swenson met in May 1949, within a few days of Swenson's thirty-sixth birthday, Schwartz was just past twenty-six, an attendant at the Willard Parker Contagious Disease Hospital in Manhattan. Of Mediterranean descent, with dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin, she presented a striking contrast to the blonde, fair-skinned, first-born daughter of Swedish immigrants, almost ten years her senior.

In one of several telephone interviews with me, Schwartz described herself at the time of their meeting as "without focus or future." Within days of their first acquaintance, "on the afternoon May had been to the Bronx Zoo and had returned to write the poem, 'Lion'—all in one sitting—she allowed me to read it," Schwartz said. "I recognized it as superior work. I realized she was a very good poet."

"My unexpressed desire, ever since I was an adolescent, was to support

a creative person. Also, I loved blue eyes. Opposites often attract and it was true in this case," she added.

Throughout the manuscript in my possession, Swenson referred to Schwartz under the code name Jay—sometimes shortened to the initials J. J., or simply to one initial, J., as it is in the poem, "Coda to J.," first published in 2003 in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*. The poet's third collection, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, contained this dedication: "For J., the first to read this book."

The couple's affectionate names for each other were Blackie for Pearl and Miken for May, a nickname derived from the Swedish "Maj" (pronounced My)."She called me Blackie because of my dark hair and olive skin," Schwartz said. "In public, we went by the book—I called her May and she called me Pearl."

The universality and pliant malleability of most of May Swenson's love poems, applicable in their metaphorical dexterity to both heterosexual and homosexual love, was undoubtedly a deliberate artistic conceit that also served to protect the poet's private life.

"She chose not to make clear what her [sexual] leanings were," Schwartz told me. Using the code name "Jay" veiled the relationship in androgyny. "It was dangerous at the time to be gay," she said.

Despite the nonjudgmental diversity and somewhat culturally safe atmosphere of Greenwich Village, disclosure could have affected publication of her work and possibly ruined her career, Schwartz observed. Each person in a similar position had to make those kinds of choices, she added.

In a remarkable November 3, 1949, diary entry, Swenson asked in a long, run-on sentence without punctuation,

> What if one day were reported just what happened without embellishment would it be a specimen incorporating essences that make up other days that make up my life would it contain the catalytic particle that determines the basic sensation I call experience would the wooden uprights the facts that took place barely show the shape of the finished structure though undecorated though unplastered the windows merely open squares the doors admitting sun wind and night through the open floors and ceilings the rooms above and below transparent a series of shells but form the main thing the unadorned skeleton more visible more striking for that?

This moment-to-moment chronicle proceeds from bed, to breakfast, to

the butcher shop for stew meat, back to May Swenson's apartment at 23 Perry Street, and through an afternoon and evening of preparing supper for and eating with friends. It begins with an intimate scene, from which I excerpt the following:

> . . . 9 o'clock. The chill autumn sky is in the window. The bed is warm. Jay is warm beside me. Half awake I feel her body pressed against my back. I turn and embrace her. Her dark rumpled head closed eyes still dedicated to sleep her mouth sharply carved resolute in sleep, her cheekbones Grecian in their pure outline her olive face so mysterious without motion. . . .
>
> It is her day off from the hospital. We can have breakfast together listen to the new records Paul brought perhaps I will remember and tell her my dream though I hardly remember any dreams lately reality is too absorbing and attractive. She no longer relates her dreams saving them for her analyst. She stirs, asks the time. I tell her to stay in bed I will make tea.

At breakfast, the conversation turns to the couple's first meeting:

> Jay said we should give a Christmas present to Clara, for it was through her that we encountered each other—that night at Kiutsuo's in the early spring when coming from Saul Baizerman's with Hymie, we went to the Japanese boy's house on Greenwich Street and I met Clara, and the night shortly after that when I called for her to go folk-dancing and I passed on the dark street a woman in slacks a wide belt and polo and turned to look after her, and later at Kiutsuo's the phone rang Clara answered her voice changed she smiled told the voice to 'come up and present yourself' and I said being introduced Didn't I just see you in the street? She said no I said, Someone who looked just like you—and today for the first time Jay told me it *was* her! It was her after all.

Within weeks after May Swenson and Pearl Schwartz met, several new love poems flowered, including "To a Dark Girl," written the same month of their introduction. "Mornings Innocent" and "Love Is" emerged the next month, in June 1949. Strangely, the incantatory love poem, "Our Forward Shadows," which appeared in mid-April, a month before their meeting, seems a prophetic foreshadowing of the event. Constructed so that the title is read as the first line, the poem begins,

Our Forward Shadows

all we see as yet
slant tall
and timid
on the floor

the stage is set
each waits
in the long lit door . . .

The complete text of "To a Dark Girl," published for the first time in 2003 in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*, follows:

Lie still and let me love you
first with my eyes
that feast upon you
as on deep skies
to count the constellations
Below your breast Andromeda
Orion and the rest

Lie still and let me love you
now with my hands
that dream over your body
as in wondrous lands
skiers ascend sun-mantled peaks
and sweep to snow-smooth hollows
where silence speaks

Lie still and let me love you
with my mouth
pressed among strange flowers
elixirs of the south
to drink their dewy musk
or like rich grapes
I nuzzle with my lips
until their wine escapes

Lie still and let me love you
with all my weight
urgent upon you

Deep-keeled elate
my body greets you a leaping boat
challenging your tide
to be the stronger
And now afloat
lie still no longer

Demand I love you
the more the more
while passion's breakers
bear us to their shore

Schwartz explained that physical intimacy between the couple was not quite so immediate as it may appear in verse—a choice, she said, that May Swenson made. Meanwhile, Schwartz said, she herself chose to briefly keep a lid on emotional intimacy while the relationship sorted itself out. "May wanted to know me before she got involved. She wouldn't go to bed immediately. She played chess with me and she took me to the theater to see a play called *The Moon Is Green*,[1] which was marvelous. When I realized I was in love with her, it scared the hell out of me. Because of my parents' experience—people loving people meant a lot of pain to me. I put feeling in a box until I could be safe."

The safety came, as Schwartz recalled, when "May made it very clear that she was serious about me—that she was not a fly-by-night person." That seriousness, and its resulting outpouring of emotion, not only shaped itself into poetry but also spilled over onto Swenson's diary pages.

"Must treat this as if no one will read it or else my thoughts are halted in the rush," Swenson wrote in an October 3, 1949, entry. The entry continues:

> Whether to deal with the present moment (which contains itself *and* the past and future in its essential oils), or remember what has gone before, or record prognostications for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?
>
> We will go backward step by step. To the two of us in bed. I have never known greater delight than with her—it is beyond the imagination's power and I had always thought that desire conjures images of fulfillment beyond reality's possibility, but here it is in the opposite, and my joy these days running the gamut of passion

1. *The Moon Is Blue* opened on Broadway, May 8, 1951, and the title may have been misremembered by Schwartz.

> on a physical plane, the gamut of tenderness on spiritual levels, weaving everything, small and large, into a great rich tapestry of wonder, beauty, delight, is more varied and more immense than anything that I can express no matter how I try—feeling runs ahead of imagination, reality sweeter than any dream, life a thousand times more fascinating, subtle, surprising than any art. So, I am carried, a figure in the tapestry, instead of weaver of it, outside it, and this is disconcerting for I'm not used to that . . .

In June of 1949, Swenson gifted Schwartz and herself with twin rings and a card inscribed,

> With this ring, myself I give
> never surrendered as to you
> May it on your finger live
> as long as its twin
> to which I am true.
> To my darling J. J. Love, Miken, 6/13/49.

It was the sealing of a relationship that would extend to seventeen years together.

Among the love poems that May Swenson wrote in the first bloom of her liaison with Pearl Schwartz are "Mornings Innocent," "Love Is," and "To a Dark Girl," in 1949; "Coda to J.," "He That None Can Capture," "Each Day of Summer," and "Standing Torso" in 1950; "School of Desire" in 1951; and "A History of Love," "August Night," and "Night before the Journey" in 1952. Only "Coda to J.," "To a Dark Girl," and "A History of Love" were published during her lifetime.

In the enchanted "Each Day of Summer," Swenson offered this image:

> Miraculous as if a mounted knight
> crowned caparisoned crossed a soot-grim moat
> to a round tower ribbon-tipped
> each day of summer
> love came bearing love
> a chalice of light
> We bathed in love and drank it
> Then our flesh
> seemed like the leaves
> enameled bright forever

"May loved summer," Schwartz observed. "It depressed her to note the weather changing to fall and turning the sky increasingly gray. Summer and warmth were so combined in her mind and spirit in making poetry—that's how she was constructed. She didn't always have my kind of energy or *joie de vivre*. She needed an infusion of warmth. The sun, growing things, and all living creatures coming to life gave her that."

The poem "He That None Can Capture" employs a central image of an acrobat performing high-wire acts above a breathless audience; it ends, "Self-hurled he swims the color-stippled heights / where nothing but whisks of light can reach him / At night he is my lover." Modeled on Schwartz's physical agility and independence, and shared with her by the poet on its completion, the poem appeared in Swenson's first published collection, *Another Animal*. Her choice to cast a male in the protagonist's role served to mask sexual identity.

In "Night Before the Journey," the shadow of mortality and dissolution of love intrudes on what is otherwise a playful, tender, and magical love poem:

> It is the last night of the world.
> I am allowed once more to show my love.
> I place a jewel on a cushion.
> I make a juggler's trick.
> I become a graceful beast to play with you.
>
> See here something precious, something dazzling:
> A garden to be your home,
> vast and with every fruit.
> The air of mountains for your garment.
> The sun to be your servant.
> A magic water for you to bathe in
> and step forth immortal.
>
> But it is the last night of the world,
> and time itself is dying.
> Tomorrow my love, locked in the box of my body,
> will be shipped away.

This thread—the approaching reality of death—appeared early in the tapestry under construction: a dark line of inquiry, which May Swenson followed with the same interest, curiosity, and instinctual perceptions that fed her examination of all of nature. As early as 1939, at age

twenty-six, she had eloquently probed her own mortality in "I Will Lie Down":

> I will lie down in autumn
> let birds be flying
>
> Swept into a hollow
> by the wind
> I'll wait for dying . . .

And in 1950, while in the initial embrace of her union with Pearl Schwartz, she wrote "Rusty Autumn," with its image of earth as mother; the poem ends, "Oh mummied breast Oh brown Mother hold me / though you are cold and I am grown grown old."

In Schwartz's work at the hospital, with an entire floor consigned to a polio epidemic, death was a constant presence. "I often held my breath as I passed the polio ward—which did no good at all, of course," she said. She cared for chronic female stroke victims and male "tuberculins." Because her lungs had been slightly scarred by early exposure to tuberculosis, she was believed to have developed resistance to the disease. One of her duties was to prepare patients who had died for the morgue. "I had to take out their teeth [dentures], tie up their chins, and wash their bodies. Actually it didn't bother me."

Despite her acquaintance with death, Schwartz apparently found the shadow of it in May's work disquieting. I say "apparently," because she told me she can't quite remember why or when she wrote a single-spaced page "reply" to May's November 21, 1949, entry (which I discovered in the envelope containing the diary manuscript), or what significance it had to her at the time. "This awareness you have of death is bad," Schwartz wrote. "I have it too, but infrequently. There isn't anything I can do about death. That's what bothers me. But at other times, I think, 'I shall live now . . . Death shall not come until I have accomplished a few things that I must. Then I shall be ready for it. Until then I shall fight tooth and nail against it.'"

In 1959, after Schwartz graduated from Hunter College, she and Swenson rode the Greyhound west, sharing lunches Pearl had prepared for the four-day trip.

They stopped first in Los Angeles, where they stayed with Swenson's sister Grace (also known as Michael) Turetsky and her family. This nonconformist sister may have been the first family member to be told that the couple's connection was more than a friendship, although Swenson's brother Roy, second in the birth order of ten siblings, suspected as much,

having deduced a hint of his sister's sexual orientation from some of her college writings.

Next, they traveled north. "May gave a reading in San Francisco and we met Ann Stanford, a poet and teacher," Schwartz said. Ann Stanford would soon after become a well-known poet.

The couple then bussed back to Utah, where Roy Swenson picked them up by car near the Arizona border and drove them on a tour of national parks—Zion, Bryce, and the Grand Canyon—before continuing north to Logan, May's birthplace and home of her parents and three of her siblings. At Utah State University, set in the pastoral foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, Swenson gave a reading of her poetry at the institution where she had graduated twenty-three years earlier, when it was known as Utah State Agricultural College.

Schwartz had been apprehensive about meeting Swenson's family. "I came from a very small family and I wasn't sure I would be comfortable with a large group," she said. "Yet, during the visit, May's family made me feel as if I belonged. We stayed at May's brother Dan's place. May's dad was very nice and her mother and I hit it off," Schwartz recalled. "I believe she wanted to convert me [to the Mormon faith] and she took me to church. I went with her because I respected her." Describing a moment when the Mormon sacrament of bread and water was passed, Schwartz said, "May's mother handed it to me and I took it, although I felt I was being hypocritical."[2] Schwartz noted, "Both May and I were still smoking at that time, but we never smoked in front of her family."

They visited Swenson's sister, Ruth Eyre, at her home in Logan. "[H]er young daughter Sheri sang a Christian song for us, 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam.' I loved that," Schwartz said. The pair then visited May's sister Beth Hall and her husband Jay, a county agent. "[W]e had an outing with a herd of sheep Jay was called to treat." In Provo, Utah, Swenson's youngest sister Margaret Woodbury and her husband Lael also hosted the couple. Schwartz found Margaret "sophisticated and discreet."

"I believe May had told Muggins of our relationship," Schwartz noted. ("Muggins" was the family nickname for Margaret.) "I don't know if anyone else [of the family in Utah] knew. Ruth may have guessed something. [May's brother] George took the time to sincerely thank me for traveling with his sister. It was charming."

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2. R.R. Knudson, the poet's last companion and literary executor, recently donated correspondence between Pearl Schwartz and May Swenson's mother, Margaret Hellberg Swenson, to Utah State University.

In 1963, when Swenson and Schwartz had been together for fourteen years, Swenson wrote "Four Word Lines," in which the poet described her continuing vulnerability under the warmth of her lover's gaze: "Your eyes are just / like bees, and I / feel like a flower," it begins. "Their brown power makes / a breeze go over / my skin..." The poem ends:

> I'd let you wade
> in me and seize
> with your eager brown
> bees' power a sweet
> glistening at my core.

"She said my brown eyes were leaf-shaped," Schwartz confided. She continued:

> May worshipped beauty and youth. She never wanted her hair to go gray—it bothered her. If she saw a gray hair in her head, she pulled it out. She disliked that my hair was graying. At first it had a sort of yellow tint, but then it took on a pewter patina—nature took care of that—and May commented on its attractiveness.
>
> When a poem was in progress, she did not share it with me (to talk about it is to defeat the writing of it). But when something was completed, she would not only show it to me, she would wait for me to get home so I could read it—first to myself, then aloud, and offer an opinion.
>
> When May was working part-time at *New Directions* [as a manuscript editor], she would go out in the afternoon to—as she called it—"catch a poem." And almost always, she was able to do so, because she opened herself to what was around her.
>
> I am not a poet. But I felt I could always tell her the truth of my reaction and she would accept it, just as she would tell me the truth. If I liked the poem, she wanted to know why I liked it—I felt it was kind of my job. If I came away with a sense of wonder, or if I felt there was something wrong with a particular phrase, she would consider that. If she felt I was right, she would rework it.
>
> Once, when I returned home, she offered me a finished poem and seemed grieved that I didn't immediately read it. "I couldn't do it justice," I told her, "but in a little while I will be able to." That met with her approval and the hurt look evaporated.

According to Schwartz, "Sometime not terribly long after I had moved in with May on Perry Street, I found her crying on the bed. Her unhappiness was that she wasn't writing and she feared she never would again. Nothing was more terrible for her than feeling she was unable to write a poem," Schwartz said. "I jumped on the bed next to her and told her she would write many poems. 'That's who you are,' I said. 'That's what you are made of.' Reassured, she stopped crying."

Schwartz described herself as the more insecure partner in the relationship.

> Often, I would ask, "Why do you love me?" May would reply, "Because you are you." "A most unsatisfactory answer," I would protest. Then I would say, "I can tell you why I love *you*; it's easy. Because you have blue eyes (and that will never change), and pretty shell ears, and large teeth—and I love large teeth."
>
> Sometimes I would ask May, "Will you love me forever?" She would answer (honestly), "I will love you as long as I love you." At other times I would say, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me," to which she would inevitably reply, "Poor child."

Years earlier, Swenson had bought Schwartz a toothbrush and presented it with a note that read, "With this toothbrush, I thee wed on a Wed-nesday in May, for a day, or a year, or forever. For a day can be a year, or a year forever, or forever a day." It was signed "M.S."

After about twelve years together, the relationship still seemed uncertain. "May told me she was 'rather surprised' she was still in love," Schwartz said. For her, however, something had changed. Schwartz told her, "I want to leave." Swenson cried. "She cried so much and for so long, I said, 'All right. I will stay.' She stopped crying."

Pearl Schwartz does not tell this story to imply she sacrificed her own desires in an act of misguided empathy to prolong a relationship that had run its course. She made a considered decision to stay, and said she does not regret that she and Swenson spent five more years together. "While the romantic involvement was not as deep, I simmered down during that period and became a steadier person," Schwartz said. "I did a lot of baking, and we both gained weight. During our eight months in Europe, I took voluminous notes on camping, churches, and art, and on our return to New York, I wrote a book manuscript called *The Blue Tent*. That and my new job filled my time. But those last years were fine in the sense that we got along well."

Preserved in the single-page document she at some forgotten moment penned in reply to May Swenson's November 21, 1949, diary entry, Schwartz's words still apply, decades after the fact. She wrote, "There is no pretense, no pretense I swear my darling. But love is like a river, shallow in some spots, deep in others. I am conscious of you always; you fill a room with such glowing bright emanations that I am dazzled . . . Anyway, dearest, remember this—I love you today, this minute, this very second. That is fact, not farce."

At eighty-three, Pearl Schwartz, who lives in the Village on Barrow Street where she has lived for decades, remains lively, funny, forthright, and generous. She is a writer of searching, evocative short fiction, some of which she has shared with me.

That long-ago November, May Swenson sat in the kitchen on Perry Street to write in her diary, the fast-flowing stream of her consciousness reaching to capture the present moment and to embrace her new love. A letter postmarked Logan, Utah, and a rejection notice from a New York magazine publisher lay on the table, set aside.

> Standing in each other's arms, having begun to rumba and coming together kissing slowing to a standstill, Jay said What night? What night? she asked breathlessly. A letter from my mother in the mailbox saying "opp" [a Swedish word] instead of "up" and "my precious daughter" all about Dad becoming bishop and Michael's wedding and the way my poems are being read at the Relief Society meetings and about harvesting the apples. And a letter from *Sat. Review* returning my poems—a blow. So I made stew and put cloves in it—mushrooms, leeks, onions, carrots, tomatoes, peppers, celery—delicious. And while it simmered and Brahms was played by Heifitz on the [phonograph], we hopped into bed and J. made love to me.

May Swenson

Whitman's Daughter

Alicia Ostriker

A great poet is a jewel of multiple faces or facets, and to see the poet from the angle of any one of those facets is to be freshly illuminated and elated. Two decades ago, elatedly writing my essay "May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" in the context of the post-1960s women's poetry movement, I felt I had made a wonderful discovery: Swenson wrote "like a woman"—a woman with the temperament of an experimental and speculative scientist (86–101). Today I relish the opportunity to look at Swenson not only as a woman poet (since no matter how proud one may be of the label, "women's poetry" is still ghettoized in the literary world) and not only as somebody in the line of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, although she is that too—and charmingly so—but as the largest thing I can find to say: let us consider May Swenson as an *American* poet. Let us think about Swenson's Americanness in the sense that Tocqueville meant when he wrote, in *Democracy in America,* "It is not impossible to conceive the immense freedom enjoyed by the Americans, and one can also form an idea of their extreme equality. . . ." (242).

Freedom is absence of constraint. Equality is absence of hierarchy, absence of relations of domination and subordination. These principles can animate not only society but poetry. And what better way to demonstrate how exuberantly in the American grain May Swenson is than to see her romping in the leaves of grass, the free and equal leaves of grass Walt Whitman first made available to poetry? For in Swenson as in Whitman, we have a poet of democratic vision and vista, a poet of inclusiveness not exclusiveness, for whom all natural phenomena are equally eligible for

celebration and all levels and layers of language are equally delectable, a poet who is always surprising, who is not *literary*, not *fashionable*, who belongs to no school (cf. Whitman's placing of "creeds and schools in abeyance," early in "Song of Myself")[1] and doesn't need to show off how learned she is, or to condescend, or to be superior, or on the other hand to polemicize—a poet as fresh as fresh milk and as sound as an egg. A poet who looks around and enjoys herself. A poet who likes the idea of getting naked in poetry and is equally interested in speculating about death. A poet who admires her own body. And other people's bodies. And the material body of the world. And who has a sense of humor.

We all know the famous opening of "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Notice how "assume" can mean "make an assumption" or "assume a form . . . or a disguise" and how Whitman announces the commonness and interchangeability of selves, the loose boundaries of the "I," at the same time as he affirms its physicality. To say that "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," moreover, not only asserts that we are all made of atoms; the casual phrase "as good," instead of the more formal and correct "equally," implies that the atoms themselves are "good." A little later, Whitman claims:

> Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . .,
> . . . . . .
> The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
> It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
> I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
> I am mad for it to be in contact with me.
> (*CP 25*)

The vast majority of Swenson's poems, like Whitman's, take place outdoors. Both poets like the textures of things. Both poets are pleased by plant life, seduced by the sea. In "Inscriptions," at the very opening of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman announces, "Of physiology from top to toe I sing…the Female equally with the male I sing . . . Of Life immense . . . Cheerful, for freest action" (*CP* 5), and a little later,

> Beginning my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
> The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
> The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,

1. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (hereafter, *CP*), 25.

> The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
> I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther
> But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.
> (*CP* 10)

Anyone who has read May Swenson will hear the compatibility between herself and Whitman. If Whitman can say "I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass" (*CP* 25), Swenson too loiters, in what she calls punningly

> A loaf of time
> round and thick
> So many layers
> ledges to climb
> to lie on our
> bellies lolling
> licking our lips . . .[2]

Swenson too likes to contemplate forms and motions, the senses, eyesight, love. "Body my house, my horse, my hound" is one of her favorite topics. Like the Whitman who sings the body electric and tells us, "I find no sweeter fat that sticks to my own bones" (*CP* 38), "The scent of these armpits aroma finer than prayer," and "I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious" (*CP* 42). Swenson writes amusedly in "Lying and Looking,"

> my armpits are fleecy pods;
> my grassy skin's
> darker in folds
> of elbow and groin
> and kneecap dents;
> if I stretch my legs
> each knee's a face
> square-cheeked, pugnacious.
> My thighs dip and play
> in glossy light….
> Oh, I
> wouldn't trade my
> body for anything. Not
> for a dove's white boat,

2. May Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New* (hereafter, *N*), 33.

not for a bear's black coat,
not for anything.
(*N* 30–31)

To Swenson, everything on earth speaks body language: a tree has a toenail, spring grass grows "out of each pore…itching," a snowplow sucks "celestial clods into its turning neck." The poems on her mother's death, "Nature" and "That the Soul May Wax Plump," are furiously and palpitatingly physical. "Poet to Tiger," her most famous rough-and-tumble love poem, is full of the funny things people do with their bodies. When Swenson imagines her soul escaping her body in "Ending," it is through her toe, and she can't help imagining the soul's transparence as "his little jelly belly." ("Belly," by the way, is one of her nicest words—but she may have gotten *that* from Gertrude Stein.) Like the Whitman who described himself as particularly sensitive to touch—"Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch" (*CP* 46)—Swenson is deeply tactile everywhere in her poems. "Touching meaning more than sight," she writes in "Deciding" (*N* 36), and in a poem on the senses called "Organs," she concludes "in the legs' lair / carnivora of Touch."[3]

In both Whitman and Swenson, affection for one's own flesh, for the world's body, and for the body of a lover, seem to be knit up into one pan-erotic bundle. Whitman's fantasies of lying with the lover are well-known. Here is one of Swenson's:

To lie with you
in a field of grass
to lie there forever
and let time pass

Touching lightly
shoulder and thigh
Neither wanting more
Neither asking why

To have your whole
cool body's length
along my own….

To feel your breast
rise with my sigh

3. *The Love Poems of May Swenson* (hereafter, *L*), 20.

To hold you mirrored
in my eye

Neither wanting more
Neither asking why
(*L* 74)

Like Whitman, Swenson is tremendously open about affection and the sliding of affection into passion, and the reverse, but she is rather reticent about sexuality. Notwithstanding today's assumption that same-sex love should bravely dare tell its name, this may constitute a poetic advantage and, possibly, a spiritual one. Because Swenson seldom specifies the gender of the beloved, we are all enabled to experience an eroticism that is pure tactility, meditation on the beloved's body and fleshly aliveness and parallel darting blood as "the face's flower and the hair's leaves / quiver in a wind of love on that isle" (*N* 28) that is the island of the other.[4] The equalizing physicality of "Love is little and not loud. / It nests within each cell, and it / cannot be split" (*L* 66) recalls Whitman's "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," but with an eroticizing charge. In "Annual," the presence of the lover speaks through familiar images as well as slightly odd syntax:

your laughter
that suddens me, your hair
a wind that stings me,
your breast a fleece of birds
that hover me,
naked, dawn-colored, cool and warm,

I open to your dew,
beginning in the spring again.
(*L* 72–73)

If we happen to know that Swenson's lover is another woman, the images reinforce that knowledge. If we happen not to know, or not to care, the metaphors stand as reminders that love is natural, that we ourselves are

4. This poem, titled "Love Sleeping," is in sharp contrast to Elizabeth Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping," a poem whose frightening closing image seems to be of alcoholic oblivion or death, and which itself may be a response to Christina Rossetti's poem "Dream-Love" ("Young Love lies sleeping") or Dowland's "Weep You No More, Sad Fountains," where the beloved "softly, now softly lies sleeping."

part and parcel of the natural world. This is the same as the strategy in the biblical Song of Solomon, where the lovers are scarcely to be distinguished from the garden and vineyard they inhabit, or from each other. The dew to which the lover opens might be a woman's sexual moisture or a man's, or kisses, or perspiration—the ultimate essence of lovemaking is that it reaches through body to soul. In Swenson's "Mortal Surge," one of her many poems analyzing the simultaneous desire and fear involved in lust,

> the stars stare at us face to face
> penetrating even the disguise of our nakedness
> daring us to make the upward leap
> effortless as falling
> if only we relax the bowstring of our will
> (*L* 58)

In "Swimmers," the lovers "in the terror of total delight" resemble the way "the wrestling chest of the sea itself / tangled, tumbles // in its own embrace" (*L* 3).

There are of course exceptions, or half-exceptions, to Swenson's reticence about gender. The final image of "In Love Made Visible," "We are released / and flow into each other's cup" (*L* 27), reads most beautifully if read as a lesbian image. "Year of the Double Spring" and "The School of Desire" imply a lesbian relationship fairly clearly, as does the vial-and-vine image of "You Are." "Because I Don't Know" is all-but-explicitly the poem of a woman desiring a younger woman. Both the reticence and the desire for candor that wrestle with each other in Swenson's eroticism are hinted at as the motive of metaphor in "The Truth Is Forced":

> Not able to be honest in person
> I wish to be honest in poetry.
> Speaking to you, eye to eye, I lie
> because I cannot bear
> to be conspicuous with the truth.
> Saying it—all of it—would be
> taking off my clothes
> . . . . . .
> One must be honest somewhere. I wish
> to be honest in poetry.
> With the written word.
> Where I can say and cross out

and say over and say around
and say on top of and say in between
and say in symbol, in riddle,
in double meaning, under masks
of any feature, in the skins
of every creature.
And in my own skin, naked.
I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
to become naked in poetry,
to force the truth
through a poem . . .
(*N* 11–12)

This is a little like Dickinson's line, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," with fear battling the yearning for disclosure. In a sense Swenson's poem is truer to the nature of internal conflict than Dickinson's, for the poet twists and turns all through the poem; the poem does not state something known, but discovers its truth in its process. Swenson's "you" and her punning "eye to eye," along with the punning "lie," at first seem to mean a single other, but "Whether you are one or two or many / it is the same," and the feared and desired nakedness, is not an end but a means. Truth, forced through symbols and riddles and finally the naked self, into the poem, revealed to the poet herself, is a burden borne and born.

Interestingly, a few of the poems in the last book Swenson completed before her death, *In Other Words*, seem entirely relaxed about describing woman-woman love. The relationship in "Under the Baby Blanket" is a long-term, comically comfortable one like that in "Poet to Tiger," but here the poet doesn't mind saying that the baby blanket "brought home . . . from your Mom" by her forty-seven-year-old lover is covered with twelve squares of little girls in sunbonnets (12–13). In "Her Early Work," a woman poet (Moore or Bishop?) is described as talking through "layers of masks," making it impossible to know "who was addressed, or ever undressed," since

Wild and heathen scents
of shame or sin
hovered since childhood,
when the delicious was always
forbidden.
(58)

Most delightfully, the poem "The Gay Life" riffs on how in any couple there is likely to be, for better and worse, a continual shifting of the roles of Mommy, Daddy, and Baby.

A corollary of eroticism for both Whitman and Swenson is that one is "a simple separate person" not contained between one's hat and boots. Connection is basic. The fluid Whitman effuses his flesh in eddies and identifies with everyone and everything he encounters, including slaves and prostitutes, ship captains and beggars: "of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (*CP* 36). Swenson isn't quite so fluid, but many of her love poems describe a tangling or reflecting or melting away of self in other—"we are released / and flow into each other's cup"—and like the Whitman who sees himself as an evolutionary product ("I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am studded with quadrupeds and birds all over" [*CP* 46]), Swenson enjoys imagining her natural history and her natural affinities. In the wonderful poem "At Truro," she rehearses her past incarnations as a sea bird, then as a crab, then:

> When I was a sea worm
> I never saw the sun,
>
> but flowed, a salty germ,
> in the bloodstream of the sea.
> (*N* 54–55)

Having "touched my foot / to land's thick back," she has a yen to go back to the sea. Similarly, Whitman claims, "I think I could turn and live with animals" (*CP* 47). In "Order of Diet," the theme is transformation and metamorphosis:

> The stone is milked to feed the tree;
> the log is killed when the flame is hungry.
> . . . . . .
> Ashes find their way to green;
> the worm is raised into the wing;
> . . . . . .
> It is true no thing of earth can die.
> (*N* 74–75)

she says, echoing Whitman's "To die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier," and then going on to ask, "What then feeds on us? . . . / To what beast's intent / Are we His fodder and nourishment?"

I do not mean to say that Swenson "takes" from Whitman or that Whitman "influences" Swenson. Source studies are boring, and besides, how do I know Swenson even read Whitman? No, what I want to say is that Whitman is a door and Swenson walks through it. "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" he cries (*CP* 41). That Whitman is "the meal equally set, the meat for natural hunger" (*CP* 37), and that Swenson partakes and is healthy. That Whitman, the most benign of father figures, gives poets—gives all of us—liberal permission to play, and Swenson plays liberally. That Whitman is America (Ezra Pound said of him, "His crudity is an exceeding great stench but it *is* America") and that Swenson inhabits this most generous of poetic landscapes.

Fresh air. Fresh language. Endlessly fresh observation. Whitman famously (and tirelessly) invokes "Poets to come!" and declares, "I spring from the pages into your arms" (*CP* 349). A rather lovely book called *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman* (Martin) includes essays pairing Whitman with Langston Hughes, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, Hart Crane, and Fernando Pessoa. I myself have proposed that if it were not for the walker in the city of "Song of Myself," J. Alfred Prufrock would never have issued his famous invitation "Let us go then, you and I . . ." ("Loving Walt Whitman" 220). A plenitude of women poets have expressed their homage to Whitman—June Jordan and Sharon Olds among them (Middlebrook 14–27).[5] Whitman "saw his poetry not as meaning or a container of meaning but as the event at which or out of which meaning is made possible," claims the critic Ed Folsom (83), and I do think this is true of *American* meaning. Whitman inaugurates that breadth and openness that is America's peculiar contribution to world poetry. But Roy Harvey Pearce says "all American poetry [since *Leaves of Grass*] is, in essence if not in substance, a series of arguments with Whitman" (qtd. in Folsom 83), and here I am struck by the proto-Bloomian tone of "arguments." Do the poets want to kill the father? In fact, Whitman himself anticipates and supports that eventuality: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (*CP* 65).

So I imagine the process in Swenson as in many of us. Walk through the door; inhabit the landscape. Look and see. Speculate. The catalogs of phenomena in *Leaves of Grass* were endless and, one must confess, can be endlessly boring; now look, look, and look again at the specifics. Look

5. See also my study of American women's poetry, *Stealing the Language*, chapter 5, for a discussion of the features of women's poetry which seem most indebted to Whitman.

at Swenson looking. How she looks, licks, touches, and tastes the details. The particularities. "Look Close," she titles one poem, and no poet does so with more inexhaustible attention. I feel an explosive amazement close to what I feel for Shakespeare when I read Swenson describing—for the *nth* time—water, for example. Or snow. Never the same metaphors twice, for Swenson is like the scientist who knows that any piece of reality may yield an infinite array of explanations. When she starts a poem called "One of the Strangest," describing the flamingo, "Stuffed pink stocking, the neck, / toe of pointed black, the angled beak, / thick heel with round eye in it upside down, the pate" (*N* 113–14), I just about swoon with happy laughter, registering the utterly apt comic inventiveness of the metaphors together with their sound-play: *st*uffed and *st*ocking, pin*k* and sto*ck*ing and ne*ck* and bla*ck*, bla*ck* and bea*k*, bl*a*ck and *a*ngled, bea*k* and thi*ck*, *t*oe and *pointed*, r*ou*nd and d*ow*n—her ear knows, by the way, that *f*s and *p*s are related, as are *b*s and *p*s in another direction—and then of course she goes on a triplet or so later to a conclusion that is consciously clumsy in sound and syntax right up until its lovely final words:

> When planted
> on one straight stem, a big fluffy flower
>
> is body a pink leg, wrung, lifts up over,
> lays an awkward shoe to sleep on top of,
> between flocculent elbows, the soft peony wings.

After laughter, yes, a recognition of beauty. Swenson's poem is an *enactment*, a *demonstration*, in the laboratory of language, in metaphor and cadence, in consonants and vowels, of what Walt Whitman all too often merely asserts. One might cite dozens of poems by Swenson that vigorously practice what Whitman sententiously preaches.

Space, for Swenson, is more complicated than it is for Whitman. Whitman writes the "Song of the Open Road" but is rather vague about what he encounters there, except that the idea puts him in an expansive mood. When Swenson gets in a car and actually drives it around the American West, she produces some of her most heart-stoppingly textured writing. Nothing else in poetry remotely resembles the suite of travel poems in *New & Selected Things Taking Place*[6] that begins with "Bison Crossing Near Mt. Rushmore." This experimental poem, in which a herd of cars is temporarily

6. Hereafter, *TTP*. The poems also appear in Swenson's *Nature*, but not as a sequence. One of the poems in the suite, "A Couple," appears with different lineation in *Nature*.

stopped by a herd of bison, is a virtual video in verse. Just as textured is the poem "Speed," in which a windshield is being spatter-painted by tints of

> Fuselages
> split on impact,
>
> stuck, their juices
> instantly dried . . .
>
> arrow—
> shapes, wings gone,
> bellies smitten
> open

The "painting" of the windshield goes in six hundred miles from fine line to thick impasto to "a palimpsest the sun / bakes through," and the poem never once uses the word "insects" (*TTP* 5).

The next in the suite, "The North Rim," is a poem to rebut anyone who thought a human being could never write a poem adequate to the Grand Canyon. This poem *is* adequate; listen to the beginning of the third stanza, where, in midday, "Angular eels of light / scribble among the buttes and crinoline / escarpments" (*TTP* 6). *Eels of light! Crinoline escarpments*! I fall off my chair thinking, *this* is what metaphor is for, these breathtaking connective shots that hit their targets as if they were in a Zen dream.

Finally, "Camping in Madera Canyon" captures freezing nightfall, sleep, and a dawn in which, "In a tent, first light tickles the skin / like a straw"; there is a "sun, about to pour / gold lava over the mountain, upon us"; and as the campers scald their lips with coffee,

> Daybirds wake, the woods are filling
> with their rehearsal flutes and pluckings,
> buzzes, scales and trills. Binoculars
> dangling from our necks, we walk
> down the morning road. Rooms of the woods
> stand open. Glittering trunks
> rise to a limitless loft of blue. New snow,
> a delicate rebozo, drapes the peak that,
> last night, stooped in heavy shadow . . .

Among the myriad sound effects that produce the scene, listen to the contrast between *daybirds wake, filling, flutes and pluckings,* and the deep tones of *snow, rebozo, shadow*. Then what seems pure physical accuracy

becomes, as so often in Swenson, metaphysics. "Night hid this day. What sunrise may it be / the dark to?" (*TTP* 8–9).

Love is as complicated as space in Swenson's work. Where Whitman announces and indeed insists on love but never gives us an actual portrait of a relationship, Swenson amply enacts affection and shows how it works in daily life as well as in moments of passionate intimacy. A few of Swenson's poems do seem to quarrel with Whitmanic enthusiasms. His "hairy wild-bee" in "Children of Adam" that "murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the full-blown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied" (*CP* 78) might have provoked a sardonic smile or frown in Swenson. She, too, has observed bees and flowers, as she shows in "A Couple," but she has some questions. The poem begins,

> A bee
> rolls
> in the yellow
> rose.
> Does she
> invite his hairy
> rub?
> (*L* 14)

Ah, perhaps so, perhaps not. By the third stanza, the poet is asking, "Does his touch / please / or scratch?" Not the kind of query Whitman ever made. And by the poem's close, when the bee has finished "his honey-thieving" and leaves the flower,

> she
> closes,
> still
> tall, chill
> unrumpled on her stem.
> (*L* 15)

Point, match. In the poem "All That Time" (*N* 163–4), Swenson describes the relationship of two trees, perhaps in a response to Whitman's famous "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (*CP* 93). Whitman's poem comes in the middle of "Calamus," his sequence of poems celebrating "manly love." The tree, "without any companion…grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green" and the poet wonders how it can go on "uttering joy-

ous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near, / I know very well I could not" (*CP* 93). Possibly having noticed that Whitman yearned and idealized but actually knew very little about relationships in either the human or the arboreal world, Swenson wrote her own skeptical little allegory:

> I saw two trees embracing.
> One leaned on the other
> as if to throw her down.
> But she was the upright one.
> Since their twin youth, maybe she
> had been pulling him toward her
> all that time,
>
> and finally almost uprooted him.
> He was the thin, dry, insecure one,
> the most wind-warped, you could see.
> (*N* 163)

Speculating that "he" might be crying on "her" shoulder, or on the other hand maybe trying to weaken her or make her bend over backward for him just a little bit, despite her stubbornness, or then again that

> he had been willing
> to change himself—
> even if it was for the worse—
> all that time.

Swenson concludes,

> At the top they looked like one
> tree, where they were embracing.
> It was plain they'd be
> always together.
> Too late now to part.
> When the wind blew, you could hear
> them rubbing on each other.
> (*N* 163–64)

Like many a man and wife, of course, but part of the subtlety of the poem is the way, after the opening "I saw," Swenson moves into the casual "you could see…you could hear," which is a way of addressing the self and the reader at the same time, aligning us with her. No friction between poet and reader—*we* see and understand alike—at the same time as the poem posits the mysteriously complicated, competitive, frictional, and codependent

ecology of people and trees in a long lifetime. When Whitman called for poems of "Nature without check with original energy," this sort of glimpse of nature and human nature cannot be what he expected.

And yet it is appropriate. It follows. The earthiness Whitman asked of us finds a home in Swenson. Perhaps there is no simpler way of demonstrating their affinity than by returning to images of grass. Whitman, early in "Song of Myself," calls grass "the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven," announces "Tenderly will I use you curling grass," gives his lifelong opus the generic title of *Leaves of Grass,* and uses the image again and again throughout his work to represent what is most natural and most ubiquitous. Now look at a hitherto unpublished poem called "The Maiden in the Grass," composed in 1936 when Swenson was twenty-three:

> Little grasses
> rising beside my arms
> and at my underarms . . .
> little wistful Grass
> your roots are white as my arms.
> shaggy rug of grass on which my body is pressed,
> my heart leaps against thee, Grass..
> do you hear my heart?
>
> O stone
> I lie cheek to cheek with thee..
> subconscious thing
> feel here velvet flesh
> and breath of rapture..
> Stone you are my lover
> You I take between my breasts.
>
> Wind, come
> you shall find out all the tender hollows
> of my young body . . .
> Come gently to me Wind
> and pass a hand along my thighs.
>
> I kiss thee, little hot Grass..
> I creep up against thee, yearning Stone..
> Have me, Wind.. I turn, I part my garment.
> [Ellipses in the original][7]

7. Published by permission of the Swenson estate; I thank Paul Crumbley for sharing a copy of this manuscript poem with me.

This pivotal poem betrays the young poet's girlish attachment to traditionally "poetic" language, the language of the past, while at the same time it is a virtual *ars poetica* that anticipates the body of her future work, the work of the body, the eroticism that wishes to share itself: "I part my garment."[8] The connection between grass and eroticism remains a thread in her writing. When her love life is evidently going well, she writes herself an erotic *aubade*: "Alert and fresh as grass I wake // and rise on mornings innocent." For both Whitman and Swenson, grass also represents the acceptance of death and the assurance of ongoing life. In the closing moments of "Song of Myself," Walt tells us, "I depart as air, / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love. / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (*CP* 68).

Swenson, too, bequeaths herself in lines we may read on a bench placed on her grave in Logan, Utah, the town of her childhood. It is good to think of the ongoing life invoked in this poem, "The Exchange," and to see how finely a poem of the end of life resembles a poem of youth:

> Now, my body flat, the ground
> breathes. I'll be the grass.
>
> Populous and mixed is mind.
> Earth, take thought. My mouth, be moss.
>
> Field, go walking. I, a disk,
> will look down with seeming eye.
>
> I will be time, and study to be evening.
> You, world, be clock.
>
> I will stand, a tree, here,
> never to know another spot.
>
> Wind, be motion. Birds, be passion.
> Water, invite me to your bed.
>
> (*TTP* 210)

8. "Maiden in the Grass" seems to me to be clearly indebted to Whitman's pan-eroticism, and this phrase in particular to recall the moment in "Song of Myself" Section 5 when the poet recalls how his soul "parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart." (*CP* 28)

May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop

Kirstin Hotelling Zona

Writing about Elizabeth Bishop's treatment of sexuality, Lorrie Goldensohn observes that for Bishop, "to be personal meant to be misread, to be trapped within the conventional feminine" (62). I would reword this slightly: to be personal risks being misread as reinforcing the conventional feminine, a category that Bishop's poetry challenges consistently. I augment Goldensohn's important point in order to emphasize both the strategic element of Bishop's restraint and the degree to which this aspect is often elided when discussing Bishop's sexual poetics. Indeed, a methodological gap seems to be growing in Bishop critics between those who address her interrogations of self and those who focus on her depictions of sexual desire. While critics such as Langdon Hammer and Bonnie Costello assert Bishop's challenges to essentialist notions of identity, a pervasive tendency persists, especially among feminist critics, to read her sexual reserve according to the very standards of self-expression that underwrite those same essentialist ideals—standards that privilege the explicit over the indirect, as if the truth is something we can attain by proclaiming its presence.

May Swenson, an intimate correspondent of Bishop's and one of her most astute readers to date, struggled to reconcile exactly those aspects of Bishop's poetic that underpin this critical gap.[1] With this in mind, it is

1. Between their first meeting at Yaddo in the Fall of 1950 and Bishop's death in 1979, Bishop and Swenson exchanged over 260 letters. Like Marianne Moore, Swenson kept carbon copies of nearly every letter she wrote to Bishop, and for this reason the majority of their correspondence is extant. Swenson's carbons and Bishop's letters to Swenson are housed in the Special Collections of Olin Library at Washington University, St. Louis; all subsequent archival references in this

perhaps no surprise that the correspondence between Swenson and Bishop echoes so precisely the exchange between Bishop and Marianne Moore. Just as Bishop was both fascinated and frustrated by Moore's morality, so Swenson was intrigued and exasperated by Bishop's sexual reserve. Likewise, while Bishop's struggle to make sense of Moore traced the defining paradox of her mentor's poetic, Swenson's effort to understand Bishop charted a similar tension. Throughout their correspondence Swenson was often frustrated with her friend's "prudish ears" (*MWW* 252–53)—ears that bore a notable likeness to Moore's. Nevertheless, Swenson was inspired deeply by Bishop's ability to produce poems that are "exacting, flawless, and plain," poems that allow "no self indulgence."[2] Negotiating these ostensibly opposing aspects of Bishop's poems meant arriving at an understanding of the powers of self-restraint. While it is increasingly common to emphasize Bishop's honesty at the expense of her reserve, Swenson was determined to articulate the ways in which the two go hand-in-hand. In the process, however, Swenson needed to confront the conflict in her own poetry between, as she put it in "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age," a "craving to get through . . . to things as they *are*" and her awareness that the world is always "*becoming*" (147).

Like Bishop and Moore, Swenson believed that explicitness often works against the process of revelation that poetry should engender: "the poetic experience is one of constant curiosity, skepticism, and testing—astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things, outside and inside the self and to determine relationships between them" (Nemerov 148).

At the same time, Swenson implied that to emphasize only the self that is seeing instead of the thing being seen is to curtail the discoveries that a poem might otherwise spark. Swenson was distinct from Moore and Bishop in her passion for effusive, erotic detail. Reconciling these aspects of her own poetry enabled Swenson to make sense of the tension at the heart of her friend's work. We encounter such awareness in "Her Early Work," the last of the poems Swenson wrote about Bishop. Begun

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chapter refer to this collection. A handful of original letters from Swenson to Bishop may be found in the Bishop Papers at Vassar College. Approximately 160 of the 260 letters between Bishop and Swenson were from Bishop, 14 of which have been published in *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters*, henceforth referred to as OA. Forty-one of Swenson's letters to Bishop appear in McFall, *Made with Words;* hereafter, *MWW*.

2. Swenson's comments quoted here were recorded when she delivered an introduction for Bishop at Bishop's October 1977 reading at the 92nd Street Poetry Center in New York City.

in March of 1983, almost five years after Bishop's death, this short poem pivots upon a grasp of Bishop's sexual reserve. The title begins the poem, which then continues:

> Talked to cats and dogs,
> to trees, and to strangers.
> To one loved, talked through
> layers of masks.
> To this day we can't know
> who was addressed,
> or ever undressed.
> Because of the wraparounds,
> overlaps and gauzes,
> kept between words and skin,
> we notice nakedness.
> Wild and heathen scents
> of shame or sin
> hovered since childhood,
> when the delicious was always
> forbidden. "A Word with You"
> had to be whispered,
> spoken at the zoo,
> not to be overheard
> be eavesdropping ape or cockatoo.[3]

While it would be a mistake to overlook the costs of closeted desire to which this poem calls our attention, we limit our readings no less by discounting the subtle logic of these lines: "masks," "overlaps," and "gauzes" do more than hide—they have the power to reveal, to emphasize, to help us "notice nakedness." I will return to this poem in more depth, but for now I want to stress that Swenson's reading granted Bishop's "whispered" words a conscious agency, and hence respect, that they are sometimes denied. Swenson's instructive grace lay in her commitment to spin clarity from contradiction, to nurture complexity where oppositions more readily triumph; though Bishop clearly struggled against the confines of heterosexist culture, her careful explorations of sexual desire can't be chalked up to coded cries of repression. On the contrary, Swenson's readings revealed that Bishop's silences were often strategic, in the service of unearthing assumptions instead of giving answers.

3. This poem appeared in *In Other Words: New Poems*, (hereafter, *IOW)* 58.

Little has been made of the correspondence between Bishop and Swenson, and I suspect that this is due in part to the portrait of Bishop that emerges from these letters. In response to the curious, attentive Swenson, Bishop appears most often in these pages as the Bishop of self-restraint, an advocate of personal distance, a remarkably Moore-like mentor in diction and self-expression.[4] Moreover, while Bishop's genuine love and respect for Swenson are obvious, she appears also at times condescending, competitive, elitist, and, as she herself put it, "nasty" when giving advice to her junior of only two years.[5] When the bulk of Bishop/Swenson correspondence became available to scholars in 1990, the wave of criticism devoted to emphasizing Bishop's autobiographical bent was just starting to pick up speed. Readers looking for clues to Bishop's intimate life details will find few in these pages. But what we do find is no less rewarding: a nearly thirty-year discussion between two of America's best poets about why they write the kinds of poems that they do.

Swenson and Bishop were drawn to one another by way of their writing. They met at Yaddo, and letters from the first ten years of their correspondence (when their exchange was heaviest) are weighted with close readings and critiques of each other's poems, most of which elicited lengthy responses. Throughout their relationship Bishop assumed and was granted the role of established superior. Particularly with regard to her early work, Swenson sought her friend's advice regularly and received it

4. Because it was Swenson who, for the most part, kept the correspondence in tact, the majority of the letters have been available to scholars only since Swenson's death in 1989. Kathleen C. Johnson, an independent scholar living in Lake Linden, Michigan, presented an unpublished paper, "Two Poets: The Correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson," at the Elizabeth Bishop Poetry Festival and Scholarly Conference in Worcester, Mass., October, 1997. Gardner McFall gives a brief commentary on their correspondence in her introduction to *MWW*. See also Richard Howard, "Elizabeth Bishop - May Swenson Correspondence," *Paris Review* 131 (Summer, 1994), 171–86. Rozanne Knudson provides details of their meeting and ensuing friendship in *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), chapters 7 and 8, and *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*, with Suzzanne Bigelow, (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), chapter 4. In her critical biography of Bishop (1993), Brett Millier gives a brief account of their relationship; see chapters 9 and 11. In chapter 1 of *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* Victoria Harrison mentions the correspondence, claiming that Bishop "played the role of mentor in this relationship" (26). And finally, I offer a brief analysis of the correspondence between Swenson and Bishop (parts of which are reprinted here) in "Urged by the Unknown You: May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop," my afterword to *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2001.

5. Bishop titled her June 4, 1958, letter to Swenson "NASTY REMARKS ABOUT 'SOMETHING GOES BY' BY MAY SWENSON"; the letter can be found in special collections at Washington University.

unsparingly: "There's a favor I want to ask of you—a big one, I hope you can do it—to read the manuscript of my book and help me strike out the no-good poems. I find myself vacillating so about my own opinions of them that I haven't been able to decide in certain cases what to leave in—and then, too, it's too big a collection I suspect even though I've weeded and weeded" (October 3, 1961).

In response to this letter, Bishop mailed Swenson a dense, five-page critique of *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*, Swenson's third book (for which Bishop would also write a dust-jacket blurb). Bishop's letter, its tiny margins overflowing with microscopic notes, advises Swenson on everything from punctuation to content, addressing the text page-by-page and almost line-by-line.

While Swenson was not shy in sharing her opinions of Bishop's work, Bishop was far less solicitous of those opinions than Swenson was of hers. This situation makes sense: at the time of their meeting, Bishop was a fairly well-known and certainly a well-respected poet, with literary liaisons securing her firmly in the folds of American contemporary poetry. *North & South*, for which Bishop received the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, had been published four years earlier. She had been awarded a Guggenheim, and the year before she met Swenson at Yaddo, Bishop served as poetry consultant at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In contrast, Swenson's career was just beginning in 1950. Though she had published several poems in various places (the most notable being James Laughlin's *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*), it would be another four years before Swenson's first book of poems, *Another Animal*, appeared in print. But despite these differences and other more substantive ones, each recognized in the other a related way of approaching poetry that set them apart from the current of self-expressive verse that was beginning to swell poetry circles at midcentury.

In 1963, after Bishop had endorsed Swenson's two most recent books with dust-jacket comments, Swenson broached the issue of Bishop's influence as candidly as she ever would:

> I guess it's because you endorsed my book that reviewers have decided I'm following in your tracks—a foolish conclusion to jump to . . . the fact is I <u>have</u> been influenced by you a lot—not as to method, but as to attitude. I'd like to be more so. But when I write I find I can't do just as I intend to—it goes its own way. I would like to find the casual and absolutely natural tone that you have

> in your poems—they are never over-colored or forced the least little bit—they are very honest, and never call attention to their effects. Their brilliance is inside, and not on the surface. And they are subtle, not obvious. I think my greatest fault is being obvious—and I never know it until the poem's been printed—quite long after that, and it's too late. (*MWW* 242–43)

This passage provides a telling backdrop to the oft-quoted response Swenson gave to Karla Hammond in an interview in 1979: "Have I been influenced by [Elizabeth Bishop]? Not necessarily, although neither of us writes confessional poetry. Elizabeth Bishop has always stayed with the objective, the large view, the impersonal which contains the personal if you look deeply. I have this tendency, but not because of any influence of hers. I think we share some of the basic perceptive equipment" (*MWW* 61).

What interests me here is not the degree to which Bishop directly did or did not influence Swenson's poetry (nor Swenson's discomfort with the idea), but the "absolutely natural" way in which Swenson slid from Bishop's "casual" honesty to her beneath-the-surface subtlety, from the "objective, large view" to the "personal" that always lurked between the lines. To Swenson, honesty and subtlety were not antonyms; these aspects of Bishop's poetry nurtured one another, and the "attitude" Swenson shared with Bishop was made manifest in her intuitive grasp of this relationship and her insatiable efforts to achieve an articulate understanding of its logic—efforts, like those between Bishop and Moore, that would stoke the fire in this friendship for years to come.

From the start, Swenson's admiration of Bishop was both fueled and furrowed by this characteristic of Bishop's poetry, what she once referred to as Bishop's "cagey" poetics (*MWW* 252–53). Especially in the early years of their friendship, Swenson's comments on Bishop's poems turned again and again to this aspect of Bishop's work:

> THE SHAMPOO I like *very* much . . . but would have a deuce of a time saying why . . . that is, it feels like something has been left out—but this makes it better, in a way . . . a mysteriousness, although the expression is perfectly straightforward. . . . I remember a poem of yours about his 'green gay eyes' that seemed even more mysterious in the same kind of way. I felt the emotion or the impression being expressed, but couldn't seize an outline of what was behind it. Guess maybe I try to read symbolism or special

> significance into this, when it [is] simply a comparison between someone's hair streaked with gray and the lichen on a cliff. No, that's not all—it's a kind of tribute to someone. . . . Well, it certainly has *occupied* me, hasn't it? It's ridiculous to try to say in reportorial fashion what a poem 'means'—but I so frequently never find out whether other people receive the same basic associations I think I've put into something—they will never tell you in so many words what they think it is saying. (*MWW* 199–202)

Though Bishop liked Swenson's interpretation, her response was just as cagey as the poem it attended to:

> I am awfully pleased with what you say about the little *Shampoo* & you understood exactly what I meant and even a little bit more. . . . The Shampoo is very simple: Lota has straight long black hair,—I hadn't seen her for six years or so when I came here and when we looked at each other she was horrified to see I had gone very gray, and I that she had two silver streaks on each side, quite wide. Once I got used to it I liked it—she looks exactly like a chickadee. . . .Shiny tin basins, all sizes, are very much a feature of Brazilian life. . . . And I am surrounded with rocks and lichens—they have the sinister coloration of rings around the moon, exactly, sometimes—and seem to be undertaking to spread to infinity, like the moon's, as well. (September 19, 1953)

Bishop's rather transparent attempt to brush aside the "special significance" of the *little* "Shampoo" was belied by her affirmation of Swenson's critique.[6] Though Bishop explained "in so many words" the imagery of the poem for her friend, she did not make explicit the link between the depictions of life with Lota and what Swenson called the "mysteriousness"—the erotic desire, that "little bit more"—that hovered among her words.

In summoning a likeness between "The Shampoo" and "While Someone Telephones" (the third in a series of poems called *Four Poems*, from which Swenson recalled the image of "his green gay eyes"), Swenson hinted to Bishop the "little bit more" she understood about her friend's "cagey" motives.[7] Like "The Shampoo" and "Varick Street" (another

6. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems 1927–1979*, (hereafter *EBCP)* 84.
7. Swenson would have seen "The Shampoo" in *Partisan Review* in 1951, when it was published as part of a three-part poem titled "Rain Towards Morning."

poem Swenson comments on along these lines), *Four Poems* is typical of Bishop in that anxious love and tender desire are woven into a sequence of stark yet slippery images: "The tumult in the heart / keeps asking questions" while

> Beneath that loved and celebrated breast, . . .
> I cannot fathom even a ripple.
> (See the thin flying of nine black hairs
> four around one five the other nipple)
> (*EBCP* 76–79)

Swenson's handling of Bishop's caginess here is characteristic; while Swenson pushed relentlessly the limits of Bishop's poems, she saluted them with a caginess of her own. Without naming that "little bit more" that she intuited, Swenson made it obvious in a letter she sent to Bishop in 1955, two years after her interrogation of "The Shampoo":

> I don't understand the Four Poems, that is, I get their *mood*, but I can only imagine what they're talking about—my imagination goes pretty wild and comes back with strange answers, none of which fit exactly. It's like smelling a strong odor, or hearing a keen sound and not being able to discover what it comes from. Didn't "While Someone Telephones" used to have a different title? . . . Reading these four poems now I have to furnish them with my own experiences because you've left yours out (their labels)—you had to, I suppose, to get them said at all. . . . So I'm left outside here, sniffing and listening, and no use pounding on the door. (*MWW* 207–8)

Bishop's response to this letter is almost apologetic: "The *Four Poems* are pretty mysterious, I'm afraid. I hoped they'd have enough emotional value in themselves so that I wouldn't have to be more specific—a little like a few lyrics from *Maud*, say, with the narrative parts left out. Any meanings you want to attach are all right, I'm sure—the wilder the better" (September 6, 1955).

It is tempting to catalog the palpable caginess of this correspondence as the symptom of sexual masking. Swenson and Bishop were both lesbians who would not lodge themselves within a growing climate of woman-identified poetry, and maintaining this distance perhaps made them wary of identifying with each other in these terms. To acknowledge openly the relationship between one's "cagey" poetics and one's desire may well have

meant sacrificing the distance that, ironically, allowed them to maintain their friendship over the years. Moreover, an unfinished poem addressed to Bishop that Swenson wrote sometime between 1961 and 1962 suggests that their friendship had the potential, at least from Swenson's perspective, for sexual intimacy. The most explicit lines of this sort appear near the end of this untitled poem:

> I was nuts
> about you. And I couldn't say
> a word. And you never said the
> word that would have loosened
> all my doggy love. . . . [8]

Whether or not Swenson's feelings were reciprocated (I have found nothing in Bishop's archive that suggests they were), Bishop was clearly unwilling to unleash the "doggy love" that she perhaps detected in her friend. At the same time, though, Swenson's attraction to Bishop turned upon this very resistance. Although she seemed to long at times for a more forthright and open communion with Bishop, Swenson was drawn insatiably to the process of *implication* to which their relationship was wed. Thus, Swenson's unfinished love poem concludes with these lines:

> Little Elizabeth who still keeps me
> wild at the end of your chain—. . .
> because because
> I have never known you years
> and years—and love the
> unknown you.
> (14)

Read in isolation, this confession seems to be a response to unrequited love, a hunger for the hard-to-get. But if we consider it alongside the published poems that Swenson wrote about Bishop and the letters from which these poems were gleaned, this admission reveals a mind far more complex. While Bishop found Swenson's understanding of the lesbian desire in her poems reassuring, Swenson was both exasperated and intrigued by her friend's unwillingness to make that desire more explicit.

8. This poem appears in full under the title "Somebody Who's Somebody" (taken from the first line of the poem) in *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, 12–14. I offer an extended analysis of this poem in my afterword to the collection.

But Swenson's response to this aspect of Bishop's work had as much to do with her own developing poetic as it did with her friend's. As we've seen, Swenson would eventually confide to Bishop that her "greatest fault is being obvious," a fault made more manifest when compared to Bishop's "very honest" verse that never called "attention to its effects." No doubt it was in part Bishop's early criticism that helped shape Swenson's sense of her "greatest fault"; while Swenson was busy prodding Bishop about her "cagey" depictions of desire, Bishop was persistently calling Swenson to task for her use of explicit anatomical words. In response to Swenson's second book, *A Cage of Spines*, Bishop sent Swenson a four-page letter in 1958 that was packed with criticism, if laced with praise. At the heart of Bishop's concern about the book was its use of "ugly words," "words [that] stick out too much and distort the poem":

> My next point . . . will make you think I am a hopeless reactionary and prude as well, probably. I don't like words like 'loins,' 'groins,' 'crotch,' 'flanks,' 'thighs,' etc. . . . Also the poems I like best, those I think almost everyone would agree *are* your best, almost never use them. . . . I am NOT saying this from any Puritanical feeling, I swear. They are in general ugly words that startle the reader in a directly physical way, perhaps more than you realize. We have come a long way in the last 100 years in freedom of speech and writing—but we are still not comfortable with those words, *usually*. . . I imagine that now you'll say that that's exactly why you use them, to startle and make the poem 'strong,' give it impact,' etc. . . . [But those words] are, or some of them sometimes are, euphemisms, and that's what makes them extra-indecent.[9]

Bishop's critique of Swenson's "ugly words" echoes unmistakably Moore's discomfort with the "sordidities" in Bishop's own "Roosters." We may recall that almost twenty years earlier, when Bishop's career was only somewhat less advanced than Swenson's at the time of this letter, Moore spent an entire night rewriting her younger friend's poem. Moore defended her actions to the startled Bishop in the following manner: the "trouble is, people are not depersonalized enough to accept the picture rather than

9. I find it interesting that Robert Giroux chose not to include this rather telling letter, dated June 4, 1958, in Bishop's selected letters, though he did include the much less explicit letter of July 3,1958 (OA 360–61).

the thought . . . few of us, it seems to me, are fundamentally rude enough to enrich our work in such ways without cost" (*Selected Letters of Marianne Moore* 403–4). Nearly twenty years after the infamous "Roosters" episode, Bishop stood where Moore once stood, advocating subtlety over starkness in an effort to explain that the most poignant expression is often enabled by restraint, a belief she articulated most succinctly in her next letter:

> It's a problem of placement, choice of word, abruptness or accuracy of the image—and does it help or detract? If it sticks out of the poem so that all the reader is going to remember is: 'That Miss Swenson is always talking about phalluses'—or is it phalli—you have spoiled your effect, obviously, and given the Freudian-minded contemporary reader just a slight thrill of detection rather than an esthetic experience. . . ." (*OA* 360–61)

Unlike her mentor, however, Bishop was distinctly uncomfortable with this role, as her repeated qualifications ("I am NOT saying this from any Puritanical feeling, I swear") make clear. Indeed, in a rather suggestive moment, Bishop invoked the "Roosters" exchange in an effort to deflect the prudishness that Swenson's interrogations sometimes implied. Returning to Swenson's comments about "The Shampoo," Bishop confided to Swenson:

> No one but you and one other friend have mentioned *The Shampoo* . . . I sent it to a few friends and never heard a word and began to think there was something indecent about it I'd overlooked. Marianne among others. . . . I'm afraid she never can face the tender passion. Sometime I must show you her complete re-write of *Roosters*—with all rhymes, privies, wives, beds, etc. left out . . . It is amazing, and sad, too. (September 6, 1955)

Once again, the oppositional thinking that underwrites Bishop's simplified portrait of Moore is belied by the sensibility she adopted in her less guarded moments. Many critics have remarked on Bishop's dualistic character, both in her person and her poems. What I find most relevant about this manifestation of Bishop's dualism is not so much Bishop's ambivalence toward Moore, but the way in which Swenson's interrogations brought this ambivalence to a head. Throughout their correspondence, and especially in the first ten years, it is striking how often Bishop's manner resembled Moore's in the early years of *their* correspondence. Instances like the one

above abound in these letters, adding weight to other, more subtle moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, in an undated letter handwritten in November of 1962, which contained her dust-jacket comments for *To Mix With Time*, Bishop wrote, "I hope you can read this. Use what you want—& turn it around any way you want. The only things I want to keep especially are the 'ungrudging' business (I'm proud of that) and 'one's pleasure is in hers,' etc." Swenson was thrilled with what Bishop wrote, and of course took it to press in its original state. The phrases Bishop felt a special fondness for read as follows: "A great part of one's pleasure in her work is in *her* pleasure; she has directness, affection, and a rare and reassuring ungrudgingness" (MacMahon 137). If these words seem strangely familiar, it is because we encountered their ancestral shapes in Moore's first review of Bishop, "Archaically New," in which the older poet praised the younger for her "ungrudged self-expenditure" that is as "automatic, apparently, as part of the nature" (M. Moore 82–83). That Bishop summoned these phrases with particular pride suggests not only that Bishop's pleasure in Swenson's poetry derived from the ways it reflected *her* own, but that Swenson's poetry conjured that conflicted place in Bishop's mind where her poetic crossed with Moore's—that slippery line where self-assertion parts from self-consciousness, where the "very honest" recoils from the "obvious."

For Bishop, this line became especially knotted around the issue of sexuality, which is in part why Swenson's sensuous poetry struck such a conflicted chord. In reply to Bishop's Moore-like critique of her "ugly words," Swenson defended that aspect of her poetic with which Bishop had taken issue:

> The physical is the beautiful to me—it's awfully strong in me—and then I don't see, logically, why buttock is an uglier word than, say, thumb. Or that groin is an ugly word, or image either. It depends on the poem's intentions, of course. The effect of all words, I grant you, comes from their associations. I guess I like physical associations. Worse, there is almost a compulsion to employ them. . . . I think my taken-for-granted belief is that, as human animals, we have *nothing but* our sensual equipment, through which all expressions and impressions flow: thought and philosophy, reason and the spiritual all included. (*MWW* 224–28)

This conception of the "physical" has more in common with Moore's explorations of materiality and embodiment than it does with Bishop's labyrinthine poems about lesbian desire. As I have suggested elsewhere, Moore's asexual reputation has occluded an understanding of the ways in which her poetry reveals a fascination with the contingency between language and corporeality, with "our sensual equipment, through which all impressions and expressions flow." Likewise, Swenson's effusive fleshiness is often read at the expense of her skepticism of bodily innocence or truth.[10] But it is exactly this sort of cost that Bishop warned against when she took to task those "ugly words," a price that she herself inflated unwittingly when she labeled Moore's similar caution a lack of "the tender passion."

As we have seen, Swenson was inspired by Bishop's ability to render startlingly honest observations without, as Moore once put it, being "insultingly unevasive" (Goodridge 92), a balance that Swenson strove after with no less impressive success. Nevertheless, Swenson's desire for Bishop to explicate the "mysteriousness" in her love poems in particular betrayed a lingering belief that sensuality—the "physical"—signals authenticity, a realm of experience unmediated by language or cultural context. At the same time, though, Swenson's skepticism of the "obvious"—her understanding that "the effect of all words . . . comes from their associations," even as all "expressions flow" through "our sensual equipment"—checked and challenged this impulse.

Swenson's early letters to Bishop are charged with her relentless efforts to work her subliminal sense of this conflict into conscious comprehension, and her poetry of this time bears the stamp of this struggle. In addition to her discomfort with Swenson's "ugly words," Bishop took issue with Swenson's early experiments with punctuation, specifically her poems that abandoned it altogether. Swenson defended her motives in the following manner:

> The non-punctuation, I'm afraid I'm committed to. . . . You say no punctuation limits one's range, but I've found that frequently an effect can be gotten from the absence of punctuation itself, that adds to the particular quality of a poem. And it causes one to work for exactness and compactness, the whole burden being on the *words* and how they are combined. The reader is induced to concentrate a little harder, too—must drop his "for granted" attitude,

10. See *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson*, chaps. 1 and 5.

> can't skim over the surface so easily. Doesn't it lure him deeper into it—force him to follow more subtle clues to understanding? (*MWW* 199–202)

Bishop's disapproval was gentle but clear: "If the qualities you expressed can be better expressed by using no punctuation (that's a better way to put it than 'without') that's all right—but I don't think you want to label yourself with a style that you may soon want to abandon" (September 19, 1953). Bishop's objection was a symptom of her keen understanding of the relationship between language and meaning, what James Longenbach describes as her comfort "with the idea that poems cannot break through their linguistic fabric, just as the self cannot be separated from the social codes from which it's made" (47). Swenson's attempts to elicit from Bishop a more explicit expression of sexual desire are linked to her experiments with form by a mutual logic: both efforts imply the possibility of breaking through form or formality to an essential authenticity, an *a priori* coherence that Bishop's poems routinely called into question.

But once again, Swenson's essentializing was checked. The "particular quality" that Swenson hoped to achieve in her poems by forsaking punctuation was not transparency, but just the opposite; she wanted to force the reader "to follow more subtle clues to understanding." Characteristically, Swenson's enthusiastic interrogation of her own logical tangles led her to a sense, however rough, of the disjunction:

> Of course there are other ways to snare the reader—I mean, one does want to capture him and make him like it. I remember, though, how opposite my earlier defense was—something about poetry must be so clear it doesn't need guides. Maybe this inconsistency in argument proves not using punct. is only a conceit. You've made me think about it at any rate. (September 14, 1953)

Just as Swenson eventually abandoned her experiments with punctuation, she also achieved a deeper understanding of Bishop's sexual restraint. Both processes, however, took almost a lifetime to unfold. Guiding this growth throughout was Swenson's generous courage, her thirst for pushing the limits of her own creative perspective. For Swenson, making sense of the relationship between Bishop's sexual reserve and her hallmark honesty meant refining the balance in her own poetry between a "compulsion" toward the "physical" and her disdain of the "obvious."

In 1963, at the height of their correspondence, Bishop wrote Swenson a letter typical for its fusion of personal life details and observations of everyday life in Brazil. While Bishop often described her fifteen years in Brazil as the happiest of her life, her contentment was at the start of its decline at the time of this letter. Bishop's lover, Lota, was immersed in her high-profile job directing the construction of a public park in Rio, an intensely demanding commitment that Bishop would eventually blame in part for Lota's suicide four years later. While the two women had enjoyed a relatively secluded life together in Samambia (the home that Lota designed among lush mountain foliage above Rio), Lota, who hated being alone, spent most of her time without Bishop in their city apartment. The stress Lota encountered at work resulted in a deteriorating state of health, from which she was never to recuperate.

After some routine remarks about the mail system, Bishop's letter began with a reference to Lota's latest hospitalization for "intestinal occlusion":

> Lota is recovering and went back to work two weeks ago—
> much too soon. But there was a big show at the Museum of Modern Art here—models, airplane photographs, etc., of all her 'job'— It opened last week and was a huge success—almost 5,000 people. . . . Lota had to cut a ribbon, receive sheathes of roses, etc—and we watched the whole thing over again on TV Monday night.

Two paragraphs later Bishop's tone shifts from anxious pride to unchecked exuberance as she describes her latest delight, a new collection of birds:

> Oh—I have three new birds—Betty T had about 20 and gave them all away except one lonely little yellow and green creature she handed to me—it turns out to be a female wild canary and I think I'll have to get it a husband. Then I couldn't resist a pair of Bica Lacquas—(Lacquer beaks—or maybe sealing-wax beaks—the word's the same)—I wish I could send you a pair and I wonder if they import them. They're the most adorable bird I know—about 3" long, including the tail—extremely delicate; bright red bills and narrow bright red masks. The male has a sort of mandarin-drooping mustache—one black line—otherwise they're just alike. They're tiny, but plump—and the feathers are incredibly beautiful,

> shading from brown and gray on top to pale beige, white, and a rose red spot on the belly—but all this in almost invisible ripples of color alternating with white—wave-ripples, just like sand ripples on a sand flat after the tide has gone out—all so fine I have to put on my reading glasses to appreciate it properly. They're almost as affectionate as love-birds, and they have a nest—smaller than a fist—with a doorway in the side, that they both get in to sleep. The egg is about as big as a baked bean—rarely hatches in captivity—but I'm hoping— From the front they look like a pair of half-ripe strawberries— You'd like them! But now I have two unwed female wild canaries—must find them husbands in order to have a little song around here— We're all silent together at present.
>
> (August 27, 1963)

Inspired perhaps by the proximity of domestic unrest and the lavish descriptions of "affectionate" "love-birds," Swenson began a poem composed largely of Bishop's own words from this letter. "Dear Elizabeth," Swenson's best-known poem about Bishop, is a mischievous, riddled exploration of lesbian love and desire, which Richard Howard describes as "an intricate meditation on sexuality and exoticism . . . a kind of causerie between the two lesbian poets about their situation as lesbians, as poets" (171).[11] It is also the product of twenty-two drafts and fifteen letters that when read together reveal a determined evolution in Swenson's understanding of Bishop's "cagey" poetics, a private forging of the path that links her early unrest to the distanced acceptance she possessed in late life.

Swenson began working on the poem immediately after receiving Bishop's letter. Her first draft is dated September 17, 1963. A week later she wrote of her efforts to Bishop, enclosing a draft with her letter: "Elizabeth, I've written a poem about those *Bica Laquas* that you described in a recent letter—I've used *your words*, almost exactly, because the way you expressed their appearance and habits, etc., is so charming. . . . It's written like a letter. . . . Have the wild canaries got husbands yet?"

The copy of the poem that Swenson enclosed on September 25 was, however, several drafts away from the first; in the week preceding this

11. Early drafts of "Dear Elizabeth," written in September of 1963, can be found in the May Swenson Collection at Washington University in St. Louis. The poem was first published in The New Yorker on October 9, 1965. It was reprinted in Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New*, hereafter cited as *N*. Richard Howard's comment appeared in the *Paris Review*, in "Elizabeth Bishop—May Swenson Correspondence."

letter, Swenson completed eight different drafts of "Dear Elizabeth," and an examination of these early versions reveals why Swenson never showed them to Bishop. By draft number eight, Swenson had untangled what appears to have been the most knotty part of the poem for her to write, the passage that received the most attention in drafts. In the final, published version, the passage appears as follows:

> They must
> be very delicate, not easy to keep. Still,
> on the back porch on Perry St., here, I'd
> build them a little Brazil. I'd save every
> shred and splinter of New York sunshine
> and work through the winter to weave them
> a bed. A double, exactly their size,
>
> with a roof like the Ark. I'd make sure to
> leave an entrance in the side. I'd set it
> in among the morning-glories where the
> gold-headed flies, small as needles' eyes,
> are plentiful. Although "their egg is apt
> to be barely as big as a baked bean . . ."
> It rarely hatches in captivity, you mean—
>
> but we could hope!
> (*N* 133–34)

These two stanzas mark the exact middle of this eight-stanza poem. They also contain the point at which Bishop's words give way most notably to Swenson's—the moment when Swenson's careful, gradual pastiche assumes a mission, a determined eagerness that seems to say, "Yes! Don't you *see*?":

> *I'd* save *every*
>
> *shred and splinter* of New York sunshine
> and work *through the winter* to weave them
> a bed. . . .
> [Emphases mine]

The speaker's insistence clearly builds on the excitement in Bishop's descriptions, but her enthusiasm turns to urgency as the stakes of this poem are made clear: while the tiny egg lies unhatched in Bishop's Brazil, it

just might come to life on Swenson's back porch, where the flies "small as needles' eyes" share a world more their size.

Bishop ended her letter by drawing a parallel between her own domestic strain and the birds' inaudible song: "We're all silent together," she confessed. Swenson seized upon this parallel, sighting a moment pregnant with possibility for working through her thoughts about Bishop. "Dear Elizabeth" is Swenson's most sustained published effort to process the frustration she felt toward Bishop's sexual reserve. What began as a straightforward response—"Yes, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*" (*N* 133)—became a gentle critique of her friend's songless love. Stifled by "captivity," the "affectionate" birds can't hatch their eggs; there is a cost, implied Swenson, to Bishop's "cagey" ways. In contrast, she portrayed the porch on Perry Street as teaming with life—the "gold-headed flies" are "plentiful," buzzing amid blossoms whose hungry vines find food in this urban haven.

The importance of this image for Swenson is emphasized by the prominence it assumes in the very first draft. While the Perry Street porch doesn't appear until halfway through the published version of the poem, it is immediately introduced in the original. After ten or so lines describing the Bicos de Lacre—the same lines that launch all twenty-two drafts—we arrive in this first draft at the following passage:

> "Extremely delicate," you say.
> Never mind. On the back porch
> on Perry St. here, I will
> build them a little Brazil.
> I will save every shred of
> sunshine, from June to September,
> and sew them a bed.

This was the first of several scribbled-over, scratched-out versions in which Swenson struggled to contain the pulse of her poem. Though the image of Swenson's "little Brazil" remained much the same throughout the poem's development, the tone with which it was delivered went through many transformations. Indeed, the tone of this passage may be said to bear the burden of the poem's purpose, since Swenson's revisions were focused largely upon its modulations.

As it appears in this first draft, the juxtaposition between Swenson's liberating porch and Bishop's barren Brazil is as abrupt as it ever gets. By placing quotation marks around Bishop's description of the birds' delicacy ("'Extremely delicate,' you say") Swenson distanced herself from

this image of refined fragility and perhaps from a diction that echoes an earlier displeasure with "ugly words." With one clipped flourish Swenson dismissed this emphasis as insignificant: "Never mind," she asserted and quickly moved on to the business at hand—the porch on Perry Street, where delicacy is neither here nor there. In the next draft Swenson moved this passage to the place it would occupy henceforth in the poem. At the same time, she removed the quotation marks from Bishop's description of delicacy, only to put them back the next time around; abrupt impatience softened as Swenson cautiously blurred Bishop's words and her own.

Swenson explored this image of delicacy and her discomfort with it in the next several drafts. Eventually, Bishop's "extremely" was blunted to "very," and by draft number five, Swenson's curtness allowed some empathy: "I understand they're delicate, not easy to keep. But never mind. . . ." At the same time, as if to make up for an escaped edge of exasperation, Swenson repositioned herself as wanting to please. "I'll do my best to manage their care," she wrote in the margins. "You can depend on it." For seven days straight Swenson worked on this poem, engrossed largely by this section and her attempts to curb the "obvious." In draft number seven Swenson paused over this passage, setting it apart in a shape distinct from the rest of the poem. With number eight she blended it back into the structure at large:

"Their nest," you say, "is smaller

than a fist, with a doorway in the side just wide
enough for both to get in to, to sleep. They're very
delicate . . ." I understand. Not easy to keep.

Well, never mind. On the back porch, on Perry
St. here, I will build them a little Brazil.
I will save every shred of New York

sunshine, from June to September, and work
through the winter to weave them a bed—
a double, exactly their size—inside a house with

the right kind of door, in among the morning-
glories, where the gold-headed flies,
minute as needles' eyes, are plentiful.

". . . Although their egg is apt to be barely
as big as a baked bean . . ." It rarely hatches
in captivity, you mean. Still, we could hope . . .

While this version of the poem still bears an impatience ("Well, never mind") that is not present in the final draft, Swenson was satisfied enough to show it to Bishop; it is less oppositional, more invitational. As a result the driving issue of this poem is made both clearer and more complex. No longer is the thrust of this central passage determined by the distance between Bishop's Brazil and Swenson's back porch. In her determined effort to make sense of her own frustration, Swenson developed, however reluctantly, a degree of sympathy for Bishop's ways—"I understand," she assured. The focus of the poem shifted from Swenson's exasperated sense of her difference from Bishop to the murkier, more interesting place where commonality breeds opposition: crafting a fertile nest for these birds is a delicate matter—no matter where, they're "Not easy to keep." Building a little Brazil on the Perry Street porch is more complicated than it first seemed to be; just any bed won't do—it must be "exactly their size—inside a house with / the right kind of door." Presumably this door differs from the locked sort that left Swenson "outside," "sniffing and listening" several years earlier as she read "The Shampoo." Nevertheless, in writing "Dear Elizabeth," Swenson came to understand that her vision of liberation had to contend with a "captivity" that linked her life to Bishop's as well as the birds': the heterosexual imperative that the Bicos de Lacre both symbolized and shook up with their unhatched eggs—that pervasive presence that, like the sun in this poem, both bathed Swenson's porch and spawned the birds' bed.

As Swenson's sympathy grew, so did her emphasis on the birds as a *couple*, hence the contingency above, between the birds' sleeping arrangements and Swenson's back porch, a contingency that would be maintained for all subsequent drafts. At the same time, Swenson made the heterosexual presumption that usually underpins such imagery more explicit in the poem. Shortly after Swenson first sent the poem to Bishop, the following lines appeared in her drafts: "I'd weave them a bed . . . *shaped like an Ark* . . ." (my emphasis). In the final version of the poem, these lines appeared as follows:

> I'd save every
> shred and splinter of New York sunshine
> and work through the winter to weave them
> a bed. A double, exactly their size,
>
> with a roof like the Ark.
> (*N* 133)

While most of Swenson's readers may visualize any number of sun-woven beds, our imaginations converge immediately upon this familiar image of

primordial, naturalized love—we can easily recall pages in picture books of happy animals filling the ark, two-by-two, "one of each." But Swenson's placement of this image also stresses the degree to which this narrative failed the "affectionate" couple, for inside the ark-covered nest lay the tiny, infertile egg. This double gesture, with its simultaneous summoning and subversion of heterosexual tropes, became central to Swenson's evolving poetic, a poetic that gained shape in part through Swenson's struggle to make sense of Bishop's sexual reserve.

Bishop was pleased by the draft of "Dear Elizabeth" that Swenson sent her: "I think the poem might work out rather well," she wrote in return (*OA* 418–19). In her next letter to Swenson, Bishop transcribed a passage about the Bicos de Lacre from a "big, colored-photograph, children's Bird Book," in which the male bird describes himself:

> My great grand-parents were born in Africa. They came to Brazil long ago. They adapted themselves so well to the new land that they seemed like natives. Frankly, I consider myself as Brazilian as you are . . . My voice is very nice, but weak, and I have no song. Even so, people like me, and find me pretty and "simpatico" . . . I do not mind being caged (?) as long as I am well-treated and have plenty of seed. I can live with other small birds and make friends with them. I get along beautifully with my wife. Occasionally we fight, but it's nothing, and we soon make up. My nest is small and round and I help to hatch the eggs.

Bishop followed this passage with a subtle critique of its contents, further complicating the opposition upon which "Dear Elizabeth" turns.

> A young botanist & natural historian who's working with Lota has lent me some books, including the one I've quoted from. One is called "The Bird-Lover," and besides all the birds, it gives complete and rather awful instructions how to catch them, build traps and cages, etc. . . . I know some dull men who know all about birds and keep 40 or 50 in their apartments—take them for airings the way the Chinese do, etc. I don't really approve—but at least they *see* them and that's something. . . . I'm about to buy another pair of Bicos de Lacre tomorrow—seeing they're so sociable. (October 12, 1963)

Bishop's coda to the picture-book portrait of the Bicos de Lacre focuses on captivity, that laden image that distinguishes Bishop's Brazil from Swenson's back porch in the poem. In criticizing the "dull men" who hoard birds in their cages and the authors who show them how, Bishop subtly cautioned Swenson against a reductive reading of her reserve. Moreover, Bishop capped her critique of the "dull men" by acknowledging her complicity with their greedy ways; she was, she told Swenson, "about to buy another pair of Bicos de Lacre."

In her reply, dated October 31, 1963, Swenson did not respond directly to Bishop's commentary, and she addressed the picture-book passage in only a cursory way. But what she did say is rather revealing:

> About the *Bicos Lacres*. . . . I *will* go up to the Bronx Zoo (where they have a splendid bird pavilion with everything in the world in it) and meet the little wonders personally. I was up there . . . about six weeks ago. Zambesie and Ranee, the lioness and tigress that I once wrote a poem about, are *gone*. I saw in another cage an old lioness that *looked* like Zambesie—but all alone. . . .

Written in 1955, "Zambesie and Ranee" is an unusually caustic condemnation of homophobic zoo-goers, those who would "prefer these captives punished, who / appear to wear the brand some captivated humans do" (*N* 152–54). In sparking a return to this poem, Bishop's letter urged Swenson to revisit the pervasive intolerance and injustice that can darken even a trip to the zoo. As a result, Swenson was forced once more to rethink her stance in "Dear Elizabeth." Indeed, in the same draft in which the ark first appears, the brusque "Never mind" is quietly dropped, to be replaced by the softened "Still, on the back porch of Perry St. here . . . ." Concurrently, Swenson's assertion that she "will build" shifts to the more deferential "I could," eventually becoming "I'd build them a little Brazil."

In her determination to find a balance between her frustration and fascination with Bishop, Swenson needed to make peace between her celebratory thirst for goodness—"but we could hope!"—and her uncomfortable understanding that Perry Street was no less captive than Bishop's Brazil, that the dominant ideology, like the linguistic structure of poems, couldn't be so simply dismissed. Guiding this process was a growing awareness of how her kinship with Bishop's restraint ("I understand") might instruct her own strategies of resistance. After all, as Bishop herself observed in the postscript to her picture-book letter, "Apparently all of the Bicos de Lacre here are descended from some that escaped—"

Above all else, "Dear Elizabeth" is a poem about language, an exploration of that mysterious slippage between our mind's eye and our tongues, a probing of the sometimes rich, sometimes wearing path from impassioned intention to the vagaries of interpretation. It is a poem woven from the threads of overlapping letters, a poem whose intricate evolution reveals the contiguity between language and being, writing and meaning. As Swenson worked through the tangles that inspired "Dear Elizabeth," she developed a deeper awareness of the issues that fed her attraction to Bishop. What began as intrigued exasperation with Bishop's sexual reserve shifted to a more subtle emphasis on the contingencies that determine all kinds of expression. Swenson never stopped flirting with the desire to break free—of convention, of tradition, of language itself. "The past," she once wrote, "is so settled, trampled over. It's no fun unless you stand on the end of the diving board, alone, naked, not thinking of 'how' or 'why' or the best technique, but just the sensation—let impulse do it, instead of heavy knowledge" (*MWW* 237–38). But Swenson's thirst for pushing the limits led her, paradoxically, to an everwidening understanding of their productive capacity. In its redeployment of Bishop's descriptions, "Dear Elizabeth" dramatizes the relationship between captivity and creativity: in her effort to unravel her uncomfortable attraction to Bishop's reserve, Swenson was literally bound by the very language she struggled against. And while the final lines assert Swenson's distinction from Bishop, they conclude a poem that also flaunts the terms of their debt. As Swenson struggled to decipher her conflicting feelings toward her friend, she came to realize that behind her fascination with Bishop's restraint lurked the power of language, its ability to both reveal and conceal, to hold captive and create.

The next poem that Swenson wrote about Bishop builds upon this realization. "In the Bodies of Words" takes place on the occasion of Bishop's death in 1979. It is both a mourning and a celebration of the friendship these poets shared. It is also a poignant meditation on the nature of language itself:

> Until today in Delaware, Elizabeth, I didn't know
> you died in Boston a week ago. How can it be
> you went from the world without my knowing?
> Your body turned to ash before I knew. Why was there
> no tremor of the ground or air? No lightning flick
> between our nerves? How can I believe? How grieve?
> (*N* 135)

The unnerving displacement Swenson felt upon hearing of Bishop's death mirrored the conflicted currents that charted their thirty-year correspondence. Like the song of the Bicos de Lacre, whose "note is" not "something one hears, / but must watch the cat's ears to detect," the bond between Swenson and Bishop was both intuitive and elusive. Swenson and Bishop shared an implicit, unspoken understanding that was, despite its inaudible song, made manifest in their mutual love of linguistic measures. At the same time, as we have seen, the unnamed pulse of their exchange sparked both frustration (there's "no use pounding on the door") and connection ("I understand. Not easy to keep."). In her effort to break through Bishop's self-restraint, Swenson was led again and again to the dynamics of their exchange, to the "cagey" nature of communication:

> How can it be
> you went from the world without my knowing?
> . . . . . .
> For a moment I jump back to when all was well and ordinary.
> Today I could phone Boston, say Hello. . . . Oh, no!
> Time's tape runs forward only. There is no replay.
> (*N* 135)

"In the Bodies of Words" is saturated with this sense of missed messages, failed expressions, perverted attempts at understanding.

> I meet a red retriever, young, eager, galloping
> out of the surf. At first I do not notice his impairment.
> His right hind leg is missing. Omens. . . .
> I thought I saw a rabbit in the yard this morning.
> It was a squirrel, its tail torn off. Distortions. . . .
> (*N* 135)

Those small but exquisite moments that bear life's beauty are deployed in this poem as reminders of the pain, without which joy would have no meaning. Images that appear full of promise and communion yield disappointment and isolation: "Light hurts," "Ocean is gray again today, old and creased aluminum / without sheen. Nothing to see on that expanse"; the sandy beach is scraped "hard as a floor by wind," and a "life is little as a dropped feather. Or split shell / tossed ashore, lost under sand. . ." (*N* 135–36).

But this sad and silent expanse is pierced by emotional contact when the speaker spots "a troupe of pipers— / your pipers, Elizabeth!—their racing

legs like spokes / of tiny wire wheels" (*N* 136). For a brief but ecstatic moment Swenson appears to feel a connection with Bishop once more. The image of these birds seems to have evoked Bishop's sandpiper, who looks

> for something, something, something.
> Poor bird, he is obsessed!
> The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
> mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.
> (*EBCP* 131)

Hope emerges in this instant, born of the realization that while language sometimes fails us, it also exceeds our limits. "In the Bodies of Words" mourns the loss of a friend, but perhaps more to the point, it signals the abrupt arrest of an exchange that for Swenson was left unfinished. In an effort to grapple with her loss, Swenson returned to the poetry that attracted her from the start, and it is at this moment that she received from Bishop the unambiguous answer she'd always sought: "But vision lives! / Vision, potent, regenerative, lives in bodies of words. / Your vision lives, Elizabeth, your words / from lip to lip perpetuated" (*N* 135). It is through language that we grow our selves, with words that we learn to see; reserve becomes regeneration when language turns from masking to that which "multiplies . . . in the bodies of words" (*N* 136).

In its title alone, Swenson's commemorative poem immediately announces the contingency between the corporeal and the linguistic; words in this poem are *embodied*: "vision lives . . . in the bodies of words." By celebrating the productive (as opposed to prohibitive) quality of Bishop's language in overtly physical terms (terms that are emphasized through the refrain of the poem), Swenson bridged her love of "the physical" and her early mistrust of Bishop's "cagey" ways. In doing so, Swenson reveled in her articulation ("But vision lives!") of that elusive, intuitive "attitude" she indeed shared with her friend.

It is no surprise, then, that in her last poem to Bishop, Swenson returned overtly to the issue that divided them most. "Her Early Work" is a concise, explicit reckoning with the difficult problem of sexual restraint. While Swenson admitted to her lingering desire to get beyond Bishop's "masks" ("To this day we can't know / who was addressed, / or ever undressed" [*IOW* 58]), she also suggested that such a desire in some sense misses the point:

> Because of the wraparounds,
> overlaps and gauzes,
> kept between words and skin,
> we notice nakedness.

Or in other words, Bishop's reticence spawned revelation. All of the unpublished drafts of "Her Early Work" underscore the importance of these lines for Swenson herself: "*But* because . . . ," they insist, as if answering an unrest that the poem initially poses (my emphasis). And indeed, this poem provides Swenson's last homage to those instructive frustrations that Bishop inspired.

"Her Early Work" is a response in part to Bishop's early poem, "A Word with You," in which the speaker uncharacteristically confides

> how hard it is, you understand
> this nervous strain in which we live—
> Why just one luscious adjective
> infuriates the whole damned band . . .
> (2)

Swenson must have smiled knowingly upon reading this passage, recalling how Bishop had taken her to task for those "ugly words" years ago. But in her late-life response to Bishop's poem, Swenson articulated an awareness still nascent in her earlier reply to Bishop's critique. While "Her Early Work" clearly speaks to a persistent longing for a more authentic, more personal truth, it just as emphatically answers that longing with a discovery more profound: linguistic "masks" don't simply compete with the "physical" truth; they accentuate, they regenerate—indeed, they impart "nakedness." Moreover, this poem offers its concession within the terms of a conversation and thus provides a quiet conclusion to the correspondence from which it grew. Though "A Word with You" "had to be whispered, / spoken at the zoo," Bishop's poetry engulfs the "obvious" in its embrace of a more subtle truth. As Swenson once put it in "Introduction for Elizabeth Bishop," "Good poets—there are few, they have always been few—are couriers of consciousness and yes, of conscience, too."

De-Cartesianizing the Universe

May Swenson's Design of Wor(l)ds

Gudrun M. Grabher

MY POEMS

My poems are prayers to a god
to come into being.
Some mornings I have seen his hair
flash on the horizon,
some nights I have seen his heel there
clear as the moon.
My poems pray him to be
manifest like lightning—
in one pure instant, abolish
and recreate the world.

May Swenson, April 4, 1962

May Swenson's 1962 poem serves as an introduction to both what this essay will *not* deal with when looking at her poetry and what it *will* focus on. The poem illustrates the poet's scientific interests, especially in space and space shuttles, landing on the moon, traveling through space, and transcending the gravitational field. "Space exploration fascinates Swenson," writes Rosemary Johnson (520), and R. R. Knudson and Suzzanne Bigelow go into even more detail: "she religiously followed newspaper and TV accounts of America's space program, and in 1984 she watched a

launching of the space shuttle" (103). May Swenson confirmed her interest in science and the space program in the "Craft Interview": "Science comes into my poetry quite a lot. The space program, the astronauts' experiences fascinate me" (Swenson 22). This, however, will *not* be the emphasis here, except implicitly, in regard to her epistemological approach to the universe.

Literary critics and friends of Swenson have repeatedly observed that she left behind her Mormon upbringing and developed a "religion" of her own. May wrote to her friends at college: "It's not for me—religion. It seems like a redundancy for a poet" (qtd. in Knudson and Bigelow 34). "Prayers" and "god" might thus seem to be inconspicuous images to start with; however, they are significant in the larger context of her understanding of writing poetry in relation to the world. Her poetry, obviously, was her religion. "Swenson searches heaven and earth for a vantage point. The problem is, none exists. The meanings of God's heavens have long since spilt out into the Einsteinian universe" (R. Johnson 520). Thus, she needs to recreate the world and the universe. And her approach is neither that of the scientist nor of the philosopher, but of the poet. As Jascha Kessler puts it, "[The] poet's task comes before either scientist or philosopher, for it describes the things that take place, and even, to speak more truly, puts them there for us, on the page..." (522). And the poet's means to put the world there for us, more truly, is language, the "productive, performative power of language," as Kirstin Zona has often stated. May Swenson "leaps to the love of language and has a ball," as Karl Shapiro poignantly puts it (392).

At first glance this poem might strike one as simple, but it is not. It achieves its intricacy through the ambiguities created by enjambment. As the etymological root of the word "prayer" suggests, Swenson sees her poems as an act of "asking, begging, and requesting" (Klein). Another etymological dictionary adds an important word, "earnestly": to pray is "to entreat, to ask earnestly" (Skeat). With that in mind, we may drop any suspicion that the poet might be using irony here. In connection with the other meanings, *ask* is most likely to be interpreted in the sense of *asking for*. However, the meaning of *questioning* is thus also implied, though subtly. The request is addressed not to God, but to *a* god, the indefinite article rendering the addressee undefined, vague, unidentified. The continuation of the thought in the run-on line challenges not only this god's identity but even his existence. Swenson thus inverts the common understanding of prayers as requests to the god whose existence is automatically presupposed. She sees her poems as prayers that

invoke, in the first place, the being of a god. Grace Schulman points to the "incantatory rhythms" of Swenson's poetry (11): "In the beginning was the word," she seems to agree with the Bible, but the word was *not* God.

Swenson proposed, "My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its expression through thought and word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. 'In the beginning was the word.…'" (qtd. in Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 127). The word asks a god to come into being. The ambiguity, even the paradoxical contradiction, is not solvable. She addresses a god, but so as to call him into being. This almost equals the poem's creation or invention of god yet at the same time leaves the possibility open that in some form he is already there, somewhere out in space. She thus manages to leave her statement indeterminate, this indeterminacy being highly reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, a poet whom, as is well known, she strongly admired. The god she has evoked is both inside the mind of his creator and outside her mind, haunting space.

This god, whom her poems may have created or called closer from out of space to the realm of human beings, is then, in the following two stanzas, situated in space though simultaneously anthropomorphized by means of the hair and the heel. The fact that she says "I have seen," however, renders his existence independent of and outside of herself. However, we know that "seeing" for Swenson is at times almost identical with creating. Again, she thus poses an ambiguity that leaves us puzzled. But even though this god of hers is attributed human characteristics, she wants him to be more manifest. After all, his hair and his heel have dissolved in the ungraspable ethereal bodies of the sun and the moon. However, his manifestation, which she prays for in the fourth stanza, is hardly less abstract. But "lightning" evokes the notion of light, which again links up not only with "flash" and "clear" but also with "seeing": "One comes to feel that nothing is lost that is visible, that there is nothing the poet's eye cannot see and describe. But May Swenson is a poet of light, not shadow. . . . her eye is caught by surfaces, contours, textures" (Howes 521). Also, "lightning" prepares for the "pure instant" of the last stanza. Lightning also happens in one pure instant.

"Reflecting poetically," as remarks Richard Bernstein, "on the relation between observation and intellect, vision and thought, Miss Swenson in 1963 closed a poem entitled 'Cabala' this way":

Eye light and mind light,
lightning taming leather
I will turn, and be
a swiftness on the dark.
(331)

But in the end it is clearly her poems that "abolish" and immediately "recreate" the world, as these words grammatically belong to "My Poems": poems that pray, abolish, and recreate. "I want to *build* a poem with language as the material," said Swenson in an interview with Karla Hammond ("An Interview with May Swenson: July 14, 1978" 65). It is this creation of the world through the words of her poems and her visions that will be the focus of the following argument.

May Swenson's cosmic and anthropological approaches to the world and the universe start not only with scientific investigations but often also with various philosophical reflections. In her poem "The Universe" from the collection *To Mix With Time*, she clearly plays around with Descartes' principle of the *cogito, ergo sum*. "There is a compelling reverse spin on Cartesianism in many of Swenson's finest lyrics," remarks Edward Hirsch. "Instead of Descartes' *cogito*, we get a plaintive call to the beloved" (336). She modifies this well-known epistemological conception that has largely determined the Western epistemological approach to the world since the early seventeenth century by both distancing herself from an exaggerated anthropocentric position and by focusing on the human being and his/her position within the larger, cosmic context. "[She] avoids seeing things from the human point of view. From choice she peers out at the world through the eyes of the things under scrutiny" (R. Johnson 521). This modification, I would argue, attempts at healing the split between *subject/human being* and *object/world* that Descartes caused and left to us as a painful heritage, forever unbridgeable. Richard Wilbur, in his foreword to Knudson and Bigelow's biography of Swenson, speaks of May's "passionate wish to cancel the distinction between subject and object, and to be at one with the portion of reality described" (5). May Swenson makes this split visible, provocative and gaping as it is, and offers her verbal stitches to mend and fix together what should never have been separated. Language, the senses, rational analysis, and emotional reactions link the human being to his/her surrounding, as the poet demonstrates. The visual design of her poems—and she insists "that the poem function visually" (Birkerts 212) "to have simultaneity as well as sequence" (Swenson, "A Note about *Iconographs*" 86)—helps her to display this wound as well as

to offer ways and means of healing it through the interaction between wo/man and the universe.

Thus, she truly re-creates the world like an architect constructing bridges over the gaps. She maps the universe according to her own philosophy: "Poetry is used to make maps of that globe, which to the 'naked eye' appears disklike and one-dimensional.… It then enlarges and reveals its surprising topography, becomes a world" (Swenson, "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age," qtd. in Zona, "A 'Dangerous Game of Change'" 231). And one may add Hirsch's comment that "her shaped verses, designed spacing and quasi-mathematical forms are love letters to Creation itself, and she continually invests the physical world (and the verbal world) with Eros, celebrating its mysteries…" (336).

I neither agree with Richard Moore, who says that this poem "is no explanation at all, but a comedy of unanswered questions echoing one another like a cat chasing its tail" (390), nor with Sue Russell, who suggests that "Swenson is a child here in Blake's sense of wonderment before the infinite" (137). The questions raised are not meant to be answered, nor are they evoked for any comic effect. Rather, these questions shake the unshakable by effecting a shifting of points of view. Wonderment is then provoked in the reader rather than being a mere expression of the poet.

For Swenson, the "visual pattern suggesting a puzzle and puzzled mind seeking an answer" (Gould 316) are meant to puzzle the reader and make him/her rethink the notions by which he/she has designed the world. Grace Schulman has rightly observed, "Questions are the wellspring of May Swenson's art" (9). The central word, visually and semantically, in this poem is the preposition "about." It occurs eight times. It runs through the whole poem from top to bottom and is placed in the center of the lines that are arranged irregularly, so that we can read it downward in a vertical, almost straight line. And it is this word that functions as a bridge between "we" and the "universe." The second-most frequently used word is "think," occurring six times in six consecutive lines in the same place. The same placement is true of the word "universe" (occurring five times) and the word "because" (occurring three times). "Lines and spaces are carefully arranged in patterns appropriate to the subject. Some words are given typographical emphasis by being set off and repeated" (Stanford 68). For all of these words one can draw a vertical line. Even though Swenson uses and repeats the phrase "we think" five times, she clearly alludes to Descartes' "I think." The use of the first-person personal pronoun in the plural, however, marks a first step toward escaping the philosopher's trap. Descartes, by means of his principle, had isolated the single, individual

THE UNIVERSE

What
is it about,
the universe
about
us stretching out? We within our brains within it think
we must unspin the laws that spin it. We think
why because
we think
because.
Because
we think
we think
the universe
about
us.
But does it think,
the universe?
Then what
about?
About
us? If not, must there be cause
in the universe?
Must it have laws? And what
if the universe
is *not about*
us? Then what?
What
is it about
and what
about
us?

(*To Mix With Time* 3)

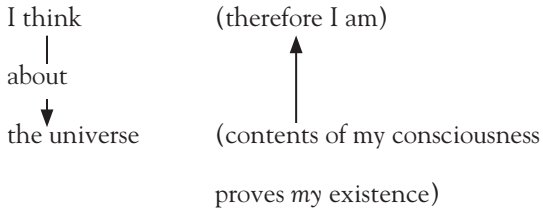
self from the rest of the world, both human and object. Having doubted everything, he had come up with the one and only certainty, namely that I who doubt must necessarily and inevitably exist. On the way to his insight, however, he had cancelled out everything. What he was left with, ultimately, was the singular *I*, which was now in need of reintroducing the world and other human beings. In this, however, Descartes failed. Be it object or other human being, they are, within the philosopher's argued universe, forever constituted by the *I* and thus deprived of an existence independent of that *I*. Whatever *I* think about is merely the contents of *my* consciousness and therefore proves my own existence but never that of which I think about. The separation between *I* and *other* is doomed to yearn for unification. By saying "*we* think" the poet has already unified human beings, transcending the solipsism of the *I* into a community of us all, us human beings. Of course, Swenson simply postulates the *we* rather than establishing a proof of its existence along philosophical lines.

The next step she takes in questioning the philosopher is to raise the question of whether the universe *thinks* as well. The philosopher attributed the capacity to think to the human being only. "But does it think, / the universe?" is the poet's legitimate question. Not only legitimate but central, as it seems, because she has placed "But does it think" right in the middle of the poem, in the sixteenth of thirty-one lines of verse. One could even argue that she has reduced the human *I* to a small letter *i* and integrated it into the *it*, the universe. (Swenson, as we know, frequently abolishes the capital *I* of the first-person singular personal pronoun as e. e. cummings did, which might be interpreted as a visual sign of diminishing the anthropocentric view. "She has in her typographical and syntactical ingenuity recalled, and often surpassed, e. e. cummings" [Salter 402]). She is thus turning the perspectives around. It is no longer we who think, but the universe that thinks. "Writing the poem from an unusual center point is one means by which May Swenson adds heretofore unseen qualities to objects. Sometimes the result is a new sense of the order of material in space or time" (Stanford 60).

If the universe thinks, Swenson wonders, does it think about us? In either direction, it is verbally the *about* which connects *universe* and *we*. Again, the etymological roots of the word—here, the preposition *about*—support further analysis. It is interesting to note that Swenson does not use "of" when speaking about "thinking." She might as well have said: "we think of." However, the word "about" is more intricate in its implications. Deriving from the Old English *abutan*, it contains the prefix *a* for on as well as *butan*, which "is itself a compound of *be*, by, and *utan*, outward.

Thus the word is resolved into *on-be-utan*: on (that which is) by (the) outside" (Skeat). Its meaning is thus "on the outside of" (Partridge) as well as "around, concerning" (Skeat). In its various meanings, this preposition serves Swenson very well to evoke a swirl of thoughts and thinking, whose center is eventually hard to identify.

From the Cartesian point of view of "I think, therefore I am," any thoughts about the universe make the universe the object of the *I*'s thinking. This might be visualized as follows:



This linear argument is turned into a circular one by Swenson. Thinking is no longer regarded as the exclusive attribute that characterizes the human being. *It*, the universe, might think as well. As argued above, the human *I* is thus integrated into the universe, which is also stated right at the beginning, the "universe / about / us stretching out?" as *about* is here used in the sense of *around*. Of course, we are surrounded, encompassed, by the universe, almost disappearing in its immensity, our importance diminished to a small *i*. However, she starts out the poem using the word *about* in a more abstract sense: "What / is it about, / the universe," implying the question of the meaning of the universe.

The answer to this question is approached, from the human perspective, from the angle of causality. The *why-because* strategy of interrogation is what marks the way "we think." Here again the use of the enjambment is highly effective: "We think / *why* because / we think / because." Split up into its various units, this sentence emphasizes several aspects: first, the basic principle of causality: "We think / *why* because" describes the pattern of causal thinking. Then she goes a step further, adding, "We think / *why* because / we think." *Why*, she seems to suggest, is the first word we come up with as a result of the fact that we think. As soon as we think *why*, however, we also think *because*, always desiring an answer. The one implies the other. Visually, the phrase *we think* is here parenthesized by the word *because* before and after it. Having thus established the basic pattern of thinking—the *why-because* line—she then paraphrases the philosopher, saying that because we think (by means of thinking) we introduce

the universe. "we think / the universe / about / us" thus becomes equivalent to saying our thinking constitutes the universe. Simultaneously, it suggests that our thinking constitutes the universe in such a manner that it must be *about* us—it must be concerned about us. Only then does she switch perspectives. What if we are not the center of the universe? What if *it* thinks, too? If it does think, indeed, the question is what it thinks about. Not necessarily about us. And if the universe does not think about us, Swenson says, carrying her argument even further, then the principle of causality need not necessarily run the universe since she has established causality as the principle of *our* thinking: "must there be cause / in the universe?" The words "be" and "cause" immediately following each other evoke the word "because" from above, which the poet had used to emphasize the principle of our causal thinking.

In other words, when we think about the universe, we impose causality, laws, on it. If we abandon our anthropocentric view, we might lose those principles and laws along with it. The universe, after all, might run according to a pattern of its own, unknown to us. It might not even be concerned about us at all. The question of what the universe is about, then, is forever unanswerable, beyond our reach. And we, the thinking species, are left behind, wondering what will become of us, what our meaning is: "what / about / *us*?" The poem ends just as abstractly as it began, evoking puzzlement about the *about* of both the universe and of us. And yet, by having created this swirl of thinking, she has carefully intertwined the universe and human beings. *Thinking* as a possibility that might work both ways has bridged the gap between the two.

Swenson's unwillingness to definitively state her human view of the universe is also reflected in the poem "3 Models of the Universe" from the volume *Half Sun Half Sleep*.

3 MODELS OF THE UNIVERSE

1.
At moment X
the universe began.
It began at point X.
Since then,
through the Hole in a Nozzle,
stars have spewed. An
inexhaustible gush
populates the void forever.

2.
The universe was there
before time ran.
A grain
slipped in the glass:
the past began.
The Container
of the Stars expands;
the sand
of matter multiplies forever.

3.
From zero radius
to a certain span,
the universe, a Large Lung
specked with stars,
inhales time
until, turgid, it can
hold no more,
and collapses. Then
space breathes, and inhales again,
and breathes again: Forever.
(105)

A brief discussion of this poem shall underline the point that was made above. Both the word "Models" and the number 3 in the title suggest that these are only some (of innumerable) possibilities to think about the universe—or, rather, about the beginning of the universe. Swenson alludes to scientific and philosophical speculations. While the first stanza conjures up the notion of the big bang at point zero in time, the second stanza suggests that the beginning of the universe coincides with the beginning of time, which seems to have happened incidentally with "A grain / slipped in the glass." The third stanza focuses more on space, though the concept of time is predominant in all three stanzas. In the last one the poet evokes the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximenes' theory that the *arché*, the original substance out of which the universe came into being, was air and breathing. The image of the Large Lung that keeps breathing again and again is reminiscent of the original breathing as life-giving force. As many poems by Swenson deal with the concept of time, this aspect is conspicuous here, too. The word *forever* concludes every single

stanza, suggesting that what characterizes, in her view, the universe, is the continuity of time. The moment X—at which time began, as it reads at the beginning of the poem—can actually be equated with forever, since "forever – is composed of Nows", as Emily Dickinson has said (J 624, *The Complete Poems* 307).

May Swenson, as Kirstin Hotelling Zona puts it, needs "to render the world in a new way" (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 61), and she designs a world of connectedness, both among humans and between humans and the universe. I will now illustrate how she defies the philosopher's solipsistic prison of the *I* by affirming the existence of the *you* as a prerequisite for the existence of the *I*: "You are, therefore I am." One of the most obvious examples in which she turns the Cartesian principle upside down is the poem "You Are" (*The Complete Love Poems* 41). The title itself announces the cancellation of the unshakable philosophical principle. She even copies the philosopher's method of doubting, but again in a reversed manner and in order to end up with a different conclusion. Actually, she starts out with the conclusion by declaring, "I dwell / *in* you / and so / I know / I am." It is certainly no coincidence that each of these five lines consists of two words, the word pairs emphasizing two as the sum of *I* and *you*. Swenson adopts Descartes' *therefore* in the middle line, by saying "and so." Moreover, the conclusion, "I know / I am" combines the philosopher's two-part syllogism, I think/know (therefore) I am, but by fusing them she makes the knowing that *I am* even stronger. This knowledge receives its evidence from the fact that I recognize my own existence through the other, the *you* who functions as my mirror. Recall that *seeing* for Swenson is more than just passively *perceiving*; seeing means to create, to constitute, to call into being. And for the poet who refuses to identify the *I* once and for all as the center of the constitution of the universe, *seeing* involves frequent changes in perspective. So it is not because I *see* you but because I *am being seen* by you that I realize I exist. Or, to go a step further, because I see (in the mirror that is you) that you see me, I conclude that I exist: "you are my mirror / in your eye's well I float / my reality proven." The word *reality* here is more powerful and more suggestive than the word *existence* would be, for this reality is not something static but dynamic and organic. "I float in your eye's well" suggests the potential of growing, which further on in the poem is explicitly expanded upon when she says, "I exist in your verdant garden / you have planted me / I am glad to grow." This goes way beyond the static recognition of the philosopher. The *you* not only verifies my existence, it enables my reality in the sense of supporting my growing and developing self.

This poem is a love poem, of course, in spite of its dwelling on philosophical reasoning. "Because I dwell in you, her poetic syllogism runs, I know I am. Because you enfold me, we know you are. Therefore, she exclaims happily, 'It is proven and the universe exists!' The lovers 'prove' each other's reality, confirming their own existence of all things. They also liberate each other from the enclosures of mind, from the isolated cell of the self" (Hirsch 336). I think it is obvious that she plays around with Descartes' principle here and confirms a view that could be compared to that of Martin Buber, who based his philosophy on the concept that whenever I say *I*, this *I* is part of the context *I-You* or of the context *I-It*—the first one referring to the *I*'s relationships to other human beings, the second one to the *I*'s relation to the objective world. Ideally, the *I-Thou* relationship, as he calls it, consists of the mutual respect between *I* and *you*, the mutual affirmation of each other's reality, each other's essence, and of being different, other. Buber uses the term "mutual confirmation" to describe this principle, which for him characterizes a profound and authentic relationship between *I* and *you*. Swenson repeatedly evokes this principle in the poem; for instance, she writes, "and I unfurled in your rich soil" or

> I dream of your hands…
> to tend me
> to pour at my roots
> the clear the flashing water
> of your love.
> (41–42)

However, Buber's emphasis also rests on the word *mutual*. In the second half of the poem, Swenson turns the mirror image around. "If I live in you" then this proves your existence as well: "for if I live in you / you live holding me / enfolding me you *are*." The rhyming words "holding" and "enfolding" beautifully manage to construct a bridge from *I* to *you*. While the word "holding" still evokes the subject-subject split, the word "enfolding" suggests a fusion, a sense of having bridged the gap. Almost literally, toward the end of the poem, her argument for the existence of the *I* through the *you* (as well as the *affirmation* of the *I* through the *you*) is turned around. Now it is the *I* that is a nurturing garden for the *you*, and it is *my* eye that reflects the existence of the *you*: "my eye is a mirror / in which you float / a well where you dwell smiling." The poet adds the word "smiling," which underlines the joy of *being* through the other,

which never seems to be an issue in the cold, abstract, joyless design of the philosopher's world. As Schulman remarks, "the poet who continually questions existence finds love at the source of the quest: existence depends on the other. The bridge between self and other is basic to the polarities..." (9).

So far, the poet, in a circular movement suggested by the mirror image, has spun by means of her words an argument for the existence—or, rather, reality—of both *I* and *you*. This argument enables her to prove the existence of the universe: "it is proven," she continues, "and the universe exists!" Swenson's word for Buber's *mutual affirmation* in this poem is, of course, *love*, the principle that runs the universe since everything reflects everything else: "one reflects the other / man mirrors god / image in eye affirms its sight." The evocation of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" is striking here, though more powerful. Dave Smith has recognized an "Emersonian cartoon" in some of her other poems. "Vision, seeing, looking, recording," he argues, "are so pervasive in her poems that one almost forgets how active she makes all the senses in the service of penetrating surface" (396). Again, Emerson's transparent-eyeball theory is much more static, whereas Swenson's poetic image involves dynamic interaction, especially through the word "affirms" and, three lines later, the "palpable roundness" that "spins." Thus, what makes the "ball" round, palpable, spin, reflect, and affirm, is the principle of love, of which one says, that is God. "And is that all?" she asks. "Love for her is akin to Martin Buber's definition of God: a power to be found, from time to time, 'between me and thee'" (Earnshaw 337).

But meanwhile she has raised more questions, imitating, as it seems, Descartes' method of doubting to render that very method vain and useless:

> no one
> can be sure
> *by himself*
> of his being
>
> and the world's seeing
> . . . . . .
> is suspect
> (41) [My emphasis]

Zona writes that this clearly "marks her portrait of selfhood as antiessentialist" ("A 'Dangerous Game of Change'" 221). It is also her severest

rejection of the Cartesian principle. No one can be sure *by himself*. I need you to be sure of my being and to be sure of the being of the universe.

Swenson raises the following, actually rhetorical questions in a form reminiscent of Descartes' methodological doubting: "do I live / does the world live / do I live in it / or does it live in me?" These questions are formulated to ridicule the philosopher's approach since the third and fourth questions cannot even be raised without the first two having been answered in the affirmative. Questions 3 and 4 contain the philosopher's dilemma. His method of doubting leads me to the proof of my existence but makes me end up in the solitary confinement of my self, from which I have to reintroduce the universe after having cancelled it out. The result is that the universe exists merely in my mind as the contents of my consciousness. "Am I?" is a question that was never raised by Descartes and yet is urgently suggested to the poet because of Descartes' way of reasoning for his affirmative answer. Swenson's answer is the same only to a certain extent; it is more ambiguous, implying a different philosophy: "am I? yes / and never was / until you made me." One is tempted to read it as *yes and no*. By linking the "yes" with "and never," she seemingly creates a paradox. However, she has already prepared us for this statement in the previous lines: the offspring of beginning and end is "*is* / not was or will be." Thus, "and never was" is meaningless, for what counts is what *is*. And what *is*, is only because of the principle of mutuality.

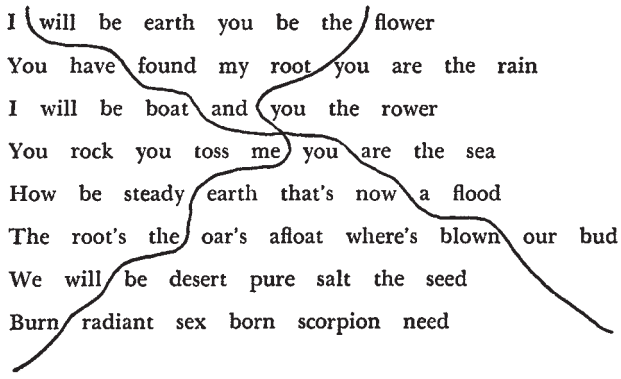
It is also significant that her concept of mutuality, which she conjures up through the image of the mirror but also through the "roundness," suggests endlessness, the absence of beginning and end. She reached this insight after searching for the "limits / of all being," seeking "pattern purpose aim" and "shape" in her "own eyes' seeing."

"She believes, apparently, that the world functions according to some hidden final purpose," says Dave Smith (396). But feeling galled by this venture, she abandons herself to the endless web of the world's intricacies: "now I know," she says, "beginning and end / are one / and slay each other." This is a perfect way of evoking duality within unity. Beginning and end stand for past and future. They are one, and yet they must be two to slay each other. Even though the word "slaying" implies death, the result is "birth," the affirmation of *being* as *now*, as *is* rather than *was* or *will be*: "but their offspring is what *is* / not was or will be." In Descartes' principle the emphasis is on "am," reducing *being* to that of the *I*. For the poet the emphasis is on *is*, affirming the being of everything that *is*: the universe and human beings. *Is*, in its affirmation of being, is universal and therefore plural in spite of its grammatical singularity, whereas *am* is singular and inescapably lonely.

Even though the poet has thus established the reality of the universe with its human beings, she does not attempt to further penetrate the mystery of the universe. Swenson believes some mysteries should remain untouched, "because mystery in itself is useful to us as human beings. If we ever got to where there were no mysteries left, we wouldn't be human" ("An Interview with May Swenson: July 14, 1978" 65). The universe is a "web of chaos," a "bursting void," but this web assumes all its significance through merely "two threads" "*crossed* upon each other," the two threads of *I* and *you,* who "are perpetual each according to the other."

In a verbally less explicit poem, Swenson uses the two threads crossed upon each other as a visual design to emphasize this point.

UNTITLED



(*Half Sun Half Sleep* 108)

"Untitled" does not develop any philosophical argument. Rather, it paints a picture, both verbal and graphic, of the interaction between *I* and *you*. As far as the semantic level is concerned, the interaction between *I* and *you* is characterized in a similar manner as in "You Are." The "earth" and "the flower" remind us of the image of the garden; the way they are connected evokes their mutual nurturing. The juxtaposition of *I* and *you* is mirrored in the combination of two polarities that complement each other. Thus, the one needs the other; the word "need" concludes the poem and thus underlines the mutual dependence, in a positive sense, of the one and the other, the *I* and the *you*: earth and flower, root and rain, boat and rower (reminiscent of Dickinson), earth and sea, desert and seed. With the same space between all words, the impression is seemingly evoked that there is no connection between them. However, it is this spacing that simultaneously creates a regular and symmetrical pattern.

The two crisscrossed lines seem to have been inserted at random because of their irregular serpentine pattern. However, they cross each other where separating the words "you" and "me." The crossing point has the effect of both connecting and separating the two, which would be in line with Buber's principle of the *Between* that both connects and separates *I* and *you*. What is meant by the simultaneously connecting and separating *Between,* is the idea of *I* and *you* approaching each other as closely as possible through mutual affirmation yet at the same time keeping their distance from each other as a sign of respect for the boundaries of the other, the otherness in its mystery and impenetrability. Zona summarizes the message of this poem as follows:

> The lack of punctuation accentuates the contingency of being, where to be—'will be' / 'you be' / 'How be'—is regularly redrafted in the shifting nexus of desire. 'I' becomes 'you' becomes 'I' becomes 'we' as the articulation of identity constructs subjectivity as contiguous, transitive, always specific but never isolated. The hand-drawn lines through the poem further underscore this sense of interweaving: crossing directly between 'you' and 'me,' Swenson's careful scribbles separate self and other while uniting them as well. ("A 'Dangerous Game of Change'" 233)

In the poem "Facing," Swenson applies almost identical means in order to bridge the gap between *I* and *you* and, at the same time, to leave the individuality of each unviolated. Visually, the poem is arranged in two columns that are separated by a white space that runs horizontally through it. They "have to be read down the page rather than across" (Schulman 13). Swenson makes frequent use of this device of the lacuna, arranging her poems in twin columns, "placing the caesura at the center, lining up those bits of silence or white space until the poem organizes itself around that central spine: bilateral symmetry" (Doty 107). This arrangement evokes again the image of the mirror, which is also explicitly mentioned at the end of column two: "I sculpture you / and in my constant mirror keep / your portrait." The numbers 1 and 2 on top of each column suggest both the duality and the oneness of *I* and *you*. The oneness or togetherness of both is also visually reflected in the first line of column one, where the inverted syntactical arrangement of the line "You I love" manages to place *you* and *I* side by side, the added word "love" semantically creating their togetherness. Also, in this manner the "You" is capitalized just as the "I."

FACING

1 2

You I love
you are that light
by which I am discovered.
In anonymous night
by your eye am I born.
And I know
that by your body I glow,
and by your face
I make my circle.
It is your heat
fires me
that my skin is sweet
my veins race
my bones are radiant.

You are that central One
by which I am balanced.
By your power it is done
that in the sky of being
my path is thrown.
And I glide in your sling
and cannot fall into darkness.
For by the magnet
of your body
charged with love
do I move.

As you are sun to me
O I am moon to you.
And give you substance
by my sight
and motion and radiance.
You are an ocean
shaped by my gaze.
My pulsing rays
draw you naked
from the spell of night.
By my pull
are you waked
to know that you are beautiful.

I rake up your steep
luster and your passion;
by my sorcery your wealth is sown
to you on your own breast,
your purples changed to opals.

So with love's light
I sculpture you
and in my constant mirror keep
your portrait
that you may adore
yourself as I do.

(*The Complete Love Poems* 21)

As in "You Are," Swenson here expresses the affirmation of the knowledge of my existence through being seen by the *you*: "by your eye am I born," which also repeats the other poem's notion that before I was seen by you, "I never was." And here, too, seeing as an act of affirming the other's existence works both ways: "You are an ocean / shaped by my gaze." The theme of "the utter dependence of being upon its opposite is dominant here" (Schulman 11) as well. Even though the two columns are supposed to be read separately, in the sixth line, for instance, one is tempted to read vertically over the space of the lacuna to end up with "And I know You are…." The horizontal lacuna that separates the two columns can be read as a visual representation of Buber's *Between* that both separates and connects 1 and 2, *I* and *you*, because as white space it marks both an absence and a presence and thus both links and separates. As white space it could be interpreted as nothing and therefore easily removed. And yet it is there; its visibility underlines its invisibility. Buber's *Between* is just as intangible, a term most convincingly visualized by means of a lacuna.

It becomes obvious in Swenson's love poems that the lacuna of the *Between* almost dissolves itself in love relationships. This idea is perhaps most explicitly expressed in her poem "Symmetrical Companion" (*The Complete Love Poems* 68), in which she says of the *I* and *you* that they are "visible to millions / yet revealed only to each other." Even though Buber insists that the mystery of each individual self remain ultimately unknown and untouched by any other, he would agree that love is a justified means to fathom the mystery of the beloved *you*. Love is the key to the *you* that unfolds the other in his/her purest authenticity without violating the secrecy of the beloved's being. Revealing is thus unveiling in order to enable intimate, subtle, profound communication between *I* and *you*. The "symmetrical companion" therefore suggests not only a close similarity between *I* and *you* but the potential of understanding each other deeply. And yet this companion is an other—not even a twin, but grand in his/her significance: "Without you I do not yet exist." Thus the silence, the lacuna between the two columns, demands the reader's attention, because it is the "attention to the silence in between [which] is the amulet that makes it work," as Swenson herself remarked (Howard, "May Swenson" 119).

I propose to read Swenson's poem "Feel Me," which has puzzled most critics and will certainly continue to do so, along the same lines, as an attempt at healing the Cartesian split between the *I* and the rest of the world. In this poem, as in so many others, Swenson applies what Sue

FEEL ME

"Feel me to do right," our father said
on his death bed. We did not quite
know-- in fact, not at all-- what he meant.
His last whisper was spent as through a slot in a wall.
He left us a key, but how did it
fit? "Feel me
to do right." Did it mean

that, though he died, he would be felt
through some aperture, or by some unseen instrument
our dad just then had come
to know? So, to do right always, we need but feel his
spirit? Or was it merely
his apology for dying? "Feel that I
do right in not trying, as you insist, to stay

on your side. There is the wide
gateway and the splendid tower,
and you implore me to wait here, with the worms!"
Had he defined his terms, and could we discriminate
among his motives, we might
have found out how to "do right" before we died-- supposing
he felt he suddenly knew

what dying was.
"You do wrong because you do not feel
as I do now" was maybe the sense. "Feel me, and emulate
my state, for I am becoming less dense--
I am feeling right, for the first
time." And then the vessel burst, and we were kneeling
around an emptiness.

We cannot feel our
father now. His power courses through us, yes, but he--
the chest and cheek, the foot and palm,
the mouth of oracle-- is calm. And we still seek
his meaning. "Feel me," he said,
and emphasized that word.
Should we have heard it as a plea

for a caress-- A constant caress,
since flesh to flesh was all that we could do right
if we would bless him? The dying must feel
the pressure of that
question-- lying flat, turning cold
from brow to heel-- the hot
cowards there above

protesting their love, and saying
"What can we do? Are you all
right?" While the wall opens
and the blue night pours through. "What
can we do? We want to do what's right."
"Lie down with me, and hold me, tight. Touch me. Be
with me. Feel with me. Feel me, to do right."

(Iconographs 34)

Russell has called Swenson's "favorite visual format—the symmetrical arrangement of lines built around a column of white space" (136).

The poem demonstrates the family members' attempts at coming to terms with the semantics of "feel me" and "to do right," at interpreting the "key" their father has left them: What did he mean? That he wished to be connected to them even after his death? That he wished them to understand that leaving now instead of trying to stay was the right thing for him to do in spite of their wishing him to live? Did he want to leave them a legacy so they would learn how to do right before they had to die? Did he express his insight that the most important thing was physical touch and caress? Did he ask for their empathy, "to feel with him"? I do not agree with Russell, who believes that this poem "begins with a key that does not seem to fit in any known door" (137).

I would like to demonstrate how this poem, like the others, offers both a verbal and a visual design of how to bridge the gap between *I* and *you*. It is the father speaking, on his death bed. He is speaking to his family, as we know from Swenson's comment on the actual event on which this poem is based. The father is reaching out to his family members, creating a bridge by means of the word "feel." At the end of the poem, the meaning of the word "feel" is turned into "touch." The verb "to feel" is a legitimate substitute for "to think" since Descartes' *cogito* means "to have consciousness of something." The translation of the *cogito* as "I think," as we have seen, has entailed the split between the *I* and everything else. The verb *to feel*, by its very semantics, effects the opposite—connection instead of split, union instead of separation. This is explicitly ensured by the grammatical object, "me." Thus, "feel me" connects the *I* with the *you*. It is interesting to observe that at the beginning of the poem Swenson separates the two words, "feel" and "me," by means of the lacuna. In the very last line, however, the words "Feel me" are placed together before the lacuna. One could therefore argue that finally the gap has been transcended; the lacuna as its visible representation has been dissolved. Moreover, if the two sides of the lacuna are to be seen as representing the side of the dead on the one hand and the side of the living on the other, this theory is also dispelled because we find the expression "feel me" as one unit on either side—in the fifth line of the fifth stanza on the right side, and in the seventh line of the seventh stanza on the left side.

While saying this, of course, the father is still alive. However, as clearly stated in the first two lines of the second stanza, his request is meant to bridge the gap not only from *I* to *you* but from the dead to the living: "Did it mean // that, though he died, he would be felt / through some

aperture"? I think all the various possibilities of interpreting the father's legacy are right, because they all aim at transcending the gap between him and the others. The gap is there, visually on the page. But again it is the poet's use of the enjambment that offers strategies of overcoming this nothingness that is. The fifth line of the first stanza, for instance, reads: "He left us a key." The break between "us" and "a key" creates a double meaning. "He left us" as read by itself signifies their separation through their father's death. However, by adding "a key" she no longer emphasizes his having left them but rather his having bequeathed to them the tool to stay connected, since the key is the means to unlock doors that separate rooms, this side and the other side. The key, as it turns out, seems to be to "feel me." When the father has expired, feeling him in the sense of touching him seems to have become meaningless because the parts of his body, chest and cheek, foot and palm, are "calm," as she puts it, that is to say no longer responding either physically or verbally since the image also conjures up the word *silence*.

Feeling, like seeing, is a very important form of sensing for Swenson. It is her starting point for expanding consciousness. "To *sense* then becomes to *make sense*," as she says in "A Note about *Iconographs*" (87). However, one must not overlook the soothing implication of the word "calm," suggesting that his battle with death as well as with life is over. Yet their first reaction to his death is that they "were kneeling / around an emptiness." Even though the word "emptiness" suggests total absence, either physical or spiritual, the word itself marks a something, a presence around which the family members gather. The lacuna between "around" and "emptiness" visibly signifies that this emptiness is thus cancelled because the emptiness has become the center of the kneeling community. Moreover, the indefinite article "an" makes the emptiness individual and specific, conjuring up the wholeness of the one who has gone. The meaning of "to do right" has been puzzling as well. I disagree with Diana Hume George that it is about aging and dying right (cf. 137). I believe that it mirrors the request or command of the father: the right thing to do is to "feel me." That the emphasis is on "feel me" is also reflected in the title of the poem where "to do right" is not mentioned. Also, "Feel" and "Me" are separated in the title by the lacuna, which conveys the request to bridge this separation. The father's legacy is then: Keep in touch with me. Feel with me in my last hour, touch my body, feel my spirit when I am gone; feel the other in all these implications because this is the key I have left you, the key that dissolves the nothingness that is between *me* and *you*. What Ann Stanford said of the poem "Cause & Effect," one could comment on this

BLEEDING

Stop bleeding said the knife.
I would if I could said the cut.
Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood.
I'm sorry said the cut.
Stop or I will sink in farther said the knife.
Don't said the cut.
The knife did not say it couldn't help it but
it sank in farther.
If only you didn't bleed said the knife I wouldn't
have to do this.
I know said the cut I bleed too easily I hate
that I can't help it I wish I were a knife like
you and didn't have to bleed.
Well meanwhile stop bleeding will you said the knife.
Yes you are a mess and sinking in deeper said the cut I
will have to stop.
Have you stopped by now said the knife.
I've almost stopped I think.
Why must you bleed in the first place said the knife.
For the same reason maybe that you must do what you
must do said the cut.
I can't stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther.
I hate it too said the cut I know it isn't you it's
me you're lucky to be a knife you ought to be glad about that.
Too many cuts around said the knife they're
messy I don't know how they stand themselves.
They don't said the cut.
You're bleeding again.
No I've stopped said the cut see you are coming out now the
blood is drying it will rub off you'll be shiny again and clean.
If only cuts wouldn't bleed so much said the knife coming
out a little.
But then knives might become dull said the cut.
Aren't you still bleeding a little said the knife.
I hope not said the cut.
I feel you are just a little.
Maybe just a little but I can stop now.
I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in a
little but then coming out a little.
Just a little maybe just enough said the cut.
That's enough now stop now do you feel better now said the knife.
I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.
I don't I don't have to feel said the knife drying now
becoming shiny.

(*Iconographs* 13)

poem: "It is as if invisible wires are connecting the two sides of the poem in a careful criss-cross pattern" (71).

"'Bleeding' and 'Feel Me,'" Alicia Ostriker observes, "have in common, technically, a white line cutting the text" ("May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" 37). In her reading of this poem, Ostriker says that "[b]y its sharply enclosed form, 'Bleeding' epitomizes vast questions of writing by and about women" (37) because it is "about the connection between *bleeding* and *feeling*, which in our culture are both believed to be natural to women, and a bit disgusting, and certainly threatening, while a dry superiority to feeling is a major sign of desirable masculinity" (36). While I propose to approach Swenson's poem "Bleeding" from a different angle—that is, as a critique of the Cartesian principle—my reading certainly goes hand in hand with Ostriker's. The fictitious dialogue in the poem between a knife and a cut and its bleeding caused by the knife can be understood on a metaphorical level as the bleeding of the Cartesian wound. The knife, then, is the Cartesian rationalizing, the cut is his principle of the *cogito, ergo sum*, and the bleeding is the result of the wound: the cut has severed the *I* from the world. As a result, it is bleeding. This is none of the philosopher's business, but it is the poet's. She introduces what has been ignored: the bleeding of the wound.

Before looking at the metaphorical implications of the wound, consider a literal cut to the body caused by a knife. Let's say I cut my finger. Depending on the depth of the cut, I have severed skin, flesh, tissue, even nerves. The result, inevitably, is bleeding, and it hurts. If the cut is only on the surface, the healing process—that is to say, the forming of new skin, the moving together of tissue—happens more or less on its own. But a deeper wound may require stitches to heal properly. Otherwise, the severed tissue and nerves might gape and the healing of the wound could cause ugly scars; also, the wound might get infected if not properly taken care of. If looked at under the microscope, the cut would not represent itself as a straight line but as an irregular one.

This image of the cut as crooked is visually reflected in the graphic design of the poem, and this open space of the cut, running as a white line through the poem, is significant. "[I]n both poems ["Feel Me" and "Bleeding"] space *is* substantial" (Ostriker, "May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" 37). This jagged visible line in "Bleeding" is reinforced by the fact that the knife keeps moving deeper and deeper, suggesting a cut of considerable depth ("The knife… / sank in farther," "I can't stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther," "sinking in a little bit"). Thus, the wound is most likely not to heal properly without stitches. Even the

bleeding itself seems to be hard to stop, as explicated in the poem. One might even imagine blood running through the cut of the wound, physically and metaphorically, through the crooked line running through the poem. If we call this line a caesura (or lacuna), then it imitates the meaning inherent in it (cf. Pack 393). In this poem, Swenson does not offer her stitches to fix the wound. Rather, she makes the wound itself, as well as its cause, visible.

The dialogue between the knife and the cut serves to illustrate ironically the two sides of perpetrator and victim. This irony reaches its climax when the knife enjoys its act of cutting but is bothered by the bleeding. It would prefer a cut without the mess of blood. If we exchange the actors for philosopher and first principle (the one has caused the other, just like the knife has caused the cut) we get the following: Descartes, as a scientist, looked for an unshakable axiom as the fundamental principle of philosophy. His way to this goal was his method of doubting. He used this method consistently and radically to see what would remain. He doubted our sensory perception of the world (dreams, hallucinations, fata morganas), he even doubted our logical and rational capacities to think (deceiving God). What he could not doubt, however, was his convincing conclusion that since I think, I must necessarily exist: "cogito, ergo sum," translated as "I *think*, therefore I am" into all kinds of languages. Of course, his revolutionary discovery came at a high cost. On the way to his principle he had cancelled out the world and was faced with the dilemma of finding a strategy to retrieve it. Whatever he tried, though, failed as it revealed itself as a shaky backdoor to a stage with one single actor left: the *I*. No matter which strategy he applied, he had forever separated the *I* from the rest of the world. But the philosopher refused to see the cut he had caused, let alone the bleeding and the pain entailed by the cut.

The third but last line of the poem lends itself perfectly as a starting point for reading the poem as a staging of this philosophical dilemma: "I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut." If we keep in mind the legacy of the previously discussed poem, we remember that "feel" is an important word for the poet, much more important than "think." Russell writes, "Swenson had an innate distrust for the separation of thinking and feeling states. What she recognized, instead, was the seductive energy of words and ideas ..." (138). So this line can be read as an ironic comment on the vanity of the philosophical insight "I think" (therefore I am). In order to come up with such a simple statement, "I think," I have to bleed first. Actually, the enjambment and the ambiguity created by it contain both the allusion to the "I think" and to the "I am" because the line can

be read in the following two ways: "I feel I have to bleed to feel I," that is, to feel my reality; and secondly, "I feel I have to bleed to feel I think." Descartes' principle is thus targeted backward. In order to gain the simple recognition that I think and that I therefore must exist, I have to bleed, suffer a wound that seems even beyond healing. This peculiar dialogue, then, starts out with an accusation on the victim's side. The knife/philosopher is upset about the cut bleeding and commands it to stop. It/he is upset because "you make me messy with this blood." Threatening the cut with sinking even deeper if it refuses to stop bleeding, which the cut can't help even though it feels sorry, it/he does sink farther. One could compare this to the philosopher's several steps through his doubting procedure. He would prefer to move from one step to the next, from doubting the senses to the even deeper doubting of our rational capacities, but does not want to be bothered by the mess of blood. The cut keeps repeating that bleeding is its inevitable companion that cannot be stopped by any commands. The cut is clearly depicted as the victim, while the knife stands as cold-blooded perpetrator, to stick to the central metaphor.

The philosopher proceeds with his method in cold blood, compelled to do so since his rationalizing is as cutting as a knife. The cut even believes that knives need this bleeding, because otherwise they "might become dull," the word "dull" suggesting connotations such as *stupid, unimaginative, mindless*. The point, however, is that the knife/philosopher is without feelings: "I don't I don't have to feel said the knife." Feeling would be an obstacle to the straight-line rationalizations of the philosopher. Feeling would stop him from cutting since the entailed bleeding would ask him to stop. All that the knife/philosopher is capable of feeling is "a little wetness" but not the full impact of the wound. In the end, however, the knife is "drying," that is to say, the blood is drying and will rub off, leaving the knife shiny, as announced earlier by the cut. If the knife stands for the philosopher, however, then he is drying up too, which leaves him unmoved, sober, dispassionate, unimaginative, cold, as the word "dry" suggests. The word "shiny," therefore, is far from evoking the connotation of "brilliant" as might be adequate to describe the philosopher's deed. Rather, this shininess evokes the sensation of coldness and edginess, the philosopher's being untouched as if nothing had happened, blameless and flawless without a spot of guilt, ready to cut again.

I have argued that May Swenson uses both verbal and visual designs to illustrate and heal this epistemological cut. In one pure instant she abolishes this world of bleeding wounds and recreates a world of links, bridges, touchings, "revealing connections where oppositions normally

endure" (Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 122). Leela Lakshmi Narayen comes to a similar conclusion: "man's experience of the world becomes a constantly renewable bridge between knower, known, and act of knowing, or a continuing subject-object coalescence whose impact constitutes experiential knowledge" (103). Several years ago I was asked to give a paper at a conference about feminist issues. That was when I started to explore my criticism of the Cartesian principle, wondering whether a woman's mind might not have come up with alternative ways of translating the Cartesian *cogito*. "I think" causes a split between me and everything else as my object. Alternative choices such as "I feel," which linguistically is a perfectly legitimate way of translating *cogito*, would entail a bridging of the gap between *I* and *you*, *I* and *the universe*. The title of that paper was: "If Descartes Had Been a Woman?" May Swenson is an answer.

That Never Told CAN Be

May Swenson's Manuscript Witnesses

Martha Nell Smith

The poets down here don't write nothing at all
They just stand back and let all be.
Bruce Springsteen, "Jungleland"

May's Mormon family was putting together its own book about the Swensons and their children. They asked Anna Thilda May Swenson to fill out a page about herself for this book. So, in a space on the page to list children, if any, May wrote the names of the thirty-nine poems she'd published since leaving Utah.
R. R. Knudson, *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*

This essay's title makes plain my subject: reflection upon some of May Swenson's manuscripts, some of the stories they tell, the poetic processes they reveal, the powerful testament they are to her commitment to the truth. Beginning by focusing on "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE," a sheaf of poems never printed or distributed through the usual mechanical vehicles for reproduction, and concluding with reflections on handwritten and typescript drafts of the poem "At the Poetry Reading" written over the course of ten years, this essay is about Swenson and audience, about Swenson's role as poet, about Swenson and writing and audience, about audience as a kind of technology for poetry. If as a writer one considers a sense of audience a technology (or a kind of tool, with explanation and performance as kinds of knowledge application), that technology

will provide analytical perspectives that are not possible if one writes with only one audience in mind (or, of course, under the illusion of writing with no audience in mind). What has happened when such a sheaf as "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE" has been made, carefully prepared, apparently not for the publishing house but for interested readers to find?

> I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
> to become naked in poetry,
> to force the truth
> through a poem,
> which, when it is made, if real,
> not a dummy, tells me
> and then you (all or any, eye to eye)
> my whole self,
> the truth.
> ("The Truth Is Forced," *Nature* 12)[1]

At the advent of the twenty-first century, the challenges are such that this handful of years already feels like a millennium, maybe two or three, old. Humans have always needed poetry, for "Art, more intimately, deals with, and forms, the emotional and spiritual climate of our experience." Human need for poetry, for poets, has been constant, continuous, everpressing. So perhaps it is neither unusual nor exceptional to say that now, more than ever, poets are not a luxury, they are a necessity, particularly those of Swenson's ilk, who flatly declare that "poetry is not philosophy; poetry makes things be, right now."[2]

In the public sphere of the United States as of this writing, language is flagrantly and persistently corrupted. False analogies are repeated without appropriate critique so that faith in intelligent design is equated with the scientific theory of evolution. Sadly, the "fourth estate" has become more a matter of stenography than editorial stewardship. Things come into being and *are* simply because they are said over and over again, as if they are the truth. Thus (self-identified) conservative think tanks have been able to turn something with widely held scientific consensus—the fact of global warming—into a supposed "issue," about which most citizens think

1. Fifteen lines of the second stanza of this poem, which was published in the posthumously printed *Nature*, were published previously in 1993 in *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*. *See pages 45–46 of Alicia Ostriker's essay here in*.
2. This quote appears in "The Poet as Antispecialist" in *Made with Words* (hereafter, *MWW*), 99. "Poetry is not a luxury" is the title of Audre Lorde's essay collected in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 36–39.

there is an ongoing debate. In 2006, religious conservatives similarly use the presidential pulpit to conflate scientific inquiry with religious belief. Because of assertions that produce murky, unclear subjects, language is therefore repeatedly emptied, eviscerated, stolen. As Swenson observed, "language is not only a tool in poetry; it is its very being. In a poem, Subject is not presented by means of language; but Language is the thing presented with the aid of subject" (*MWW* 99). Over and over again, Swenson mused on a significant part of this fact—that *subject* (say, in poetic discourse) gives, or by implication (say, in political discourse) steals, language from us.

This essay's ruminations blend my own musings on Swenson's manuscripts (and what I have learned from looking at them) with Swenson's more capacious, more generous, more insightful reflections, bequeathed in her manuscripts, in her published poems (or "children"), and in her abundant published prose. Doing so, I propose the necessity of refusing to stand back and *let all be* and the concomitant imperative to, as H. D. would have it, "Write, write, or die" (H. D. 7).

Swenson's "In Consideration of Writing Prose" anticipated H. D.'s declaration:

> What do I have to say before I die? It is something no one else has said or can say because since each one of us is one of a kind, what I will say is important coming from me. . . . True, each person is different from all others, but, equally true, all persons in a sense are the same—not identical but similar. . . . Will you in your message emphasize individuality and difference or commonality and similarity with others? Do you want to show how you are like others and they like you or how you deviate? Perhaps both? Is not all art a cry of "Look at me! Learn from me! Listen!" . . . Does not the artist crave understanding of self in equal measure as he insists on exploring, teaching, imposing his ideas and standards on others? . . .
>
> What of an un-self-centered attitude—one aiming not at seeking understanding for himself, not self-revelatory and self-obscuring at once, but with the object of understanding his audience and revealing *it* to itself and himself. Not "Look, here I am!" but "See, there you are" (*MWW,* epigraph).

Individuality. Uniqueness. Individuality and uniqueness and tension with community, friction with and within group bonds even as they are craved. Absolute confidence in the power to reveal the other—the audience of,

not the writer of, the poem. What, *What*, of an *un*-self-centered attitude? *What* of really probing the impact, the engineering of writing via its relation to, its consciousness of, audience? By using a poem by William Blake as an epigraph for and to title her carefully choreographed manuscript sheaf, "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE," Swenson placed her work directly in a lineage of visionary poets and implicitly conveyed a strong sense of a literary audience, one apt to recognize how she situated her work and her being as poet:

> Never seek to tell thy love,
>
> Love that never told can be;
> For the gentle wind doth move
> Silently, invisibly,
>
> I told my love, I told my love,
> I told her all my heart;
> Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
> Ah, she did depart;
>
> Soon as she was gone from me
> A traveler came by
> Silently, invisibly
> He took her with a sigh.[3]

It is not at all surprising that Swenson was drawn to this wry lyric of Blake's to serve as epigraph to poems she collected in the late 1940s but never published as a group, though the manuscript is prepared as a very neatly laid out chapbook of twenty songs, complete with an index and dates, presumably of composition.

This profoundly comic lyric highlights showing, doing, and living rather than telling. By implication, readers are expected to be active, to do rather than tell. In making an epigraph for her volume, Swenson finished the lyric for Blake, choosing his alternatives "seek" rather than "pain" in the first line and "He took her with a sigh" rather than "O was no deny" as the last line. She left it to the reader to decide how these choices and the resulting lyric comment on the twenty love songs that follow.

"We see – Comparatively – " Dickinson declared (*Poems: Variorum Edition* F 25; *Manuscript Books* FP 580, *Poems* JP 534), and Robert Frost, whose statue in near-conversation with that of Emily Dickinson is right

3. From "Love's Secret," *William Blake: The Complete Poems*, 134.

on Main Street in Amherst, just west of the Evergreens and Homestead (the Dickinson family houses), would echo and elaborate her observation in 1930 when asked to give a talk, "Education by Poetry," before the Amherst Alumni Council. "We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties, but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky," Frost said. "The metaphor whose manage we are best taught in poetry—that is all there is of thinking. It may not seem far for the mind to go but it is the mind's furthest. The richest accumulation of the ages is the noble metaphors we have rolled up" (336–337).

His subject was "Education by Poetry," and as had Dickinson and many others, Frost mused upon the fact that all thinking is metaphor. Swenson, in musing on poetry—on metaphor and its powers—as she created the twenty songs in her manuscript, cued to her reader that she is Blake's passionate audience, letting his lyric line guide her nomenclature.

Like Blake, Swenson was a keen observer, a cormorant of science—of scientific ways of thinking and their implications for poetry, for poetic apprehension of the world; like Blake, she wrote astonishing yet deceptively simple lyrics; like Blake, she always remembered that humor was essential to any serious philosophical and poetical pursuit. Alicia Ostriker writes, "What critics [specifically Anthony Hecht and X. J. Kennedy] have called Swenson's 'calculated naïveté' or her ability to become 'a child, but a highly sophisticated child' is actually that childlike ability to envision something freshly, to ask incessant questions and always be prepared for unexpected answers, required of the creative scientist. Thus she was in the habit of writing poems in the form of riddles or quasi-riddles, thoroughly examining a thing while withholding its name. These are fun, first of all, and some of her nicest work rides on the fun. . . ." (*Writing Like a Woman* 87).

Critical inquiry cannot be fruitful without remembering the importance of having fun, in call and response as in all vital human exchanges. As Blake's audience, whom did Swenson imagine to be the audience for the response she could not help but let be?

Blake's call:

> Never seek to tell thy love,
> Love that never told can be;
> For the gentle wind doth move
> Silently, invisibly,

Swenson's response, "Of All Who Love You," the fifteenth song of the twenty collected in "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE":

> Of all who love you
> none love as I
> for they their love can tell
> and need not it deny

Blake's call:

> I told my love, I told my love,
> I told her all my heart;
> Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
> Ah, she did depart;

Swenson's eighteenth song, "IN LOVE ARE WE MADE VISIBLE":

> In love we are set free
> Objective bone
> and flesh no longer insulate us
> to ourselves alone

Blake's call:

> Soon as she was gone from me
> A traveler came by
> Silently, invisibly
> He took her with a sigh.

The last stanza of "Dreams and Ashes," Swenson's twentieth song, which is also the last stanza of the handmade volume:

> Only on the unmarked page
> wherever the bold mind dashes
> will my fled love follow me
> the rest is dream and ashes

Blake's traveler, who enacts, who calls, who shows where to follow rather than tells, gets the girl. Swenson's speaker knows that the bold mind dashing, the fled love following, making things be, lifts one out of "dream and ashes." She knows that to experience the fled love's return, "one does not, to begin with, say its name" (*MWW* 143).

Swenson wrote in "The Poet as Antispecialist," "At one time, wishing to clarify to myself the distinction between poetry and other modes of expression, I put down these notes":

> Poetry doesn't tell; it shows. Prose tells. Poetry is not philosophy; poetry makes things be, right now. Not an idea, but a happening. It is not music, but it sounds while showing. It is not mobile; it is a thing taking place—active, interactive, in a place. It is not thought; it has to do with senses and muscles. It is not dancing, but it moves while it remains. (*MWW* 101)

Swenson might have been writing of herself (rather than Marianne Moore) when she declared in "A Matter of Diction," "She continues to teach us that poetry is not constructed with ideas or sensations or revelations or passions, though these are the seductive spots and glitters, but that instead it depends on a strong, limber, complex, organic trellis of language" (*MWW* 88). Like Blake, like Dickinson, like all of the poets who are great thinkers, Swenson knew the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual are all intertwined. They cannot be unhinged from one another and have the same effect as when their interdependencies are acknowledged and embraced, each and all very much part of the material world, as well as of the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual—these worlds all inhere in one another.

Dickinson is rumored to have said that she knew poetry by the fact of its making her feel as if the top of her head would come off. We know that her most frequently addressed correspondent, Susan Dickinson, remarked in a letter to Emily Dickinson about one of her stanzas: "I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never *can* again" (*Open Me Carefully* 99). As one can see from "Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem," the online publication of their exchanges regarding "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," Dickinson and her most intimate reader acknowledge the physical effects of poetry, its affective powers on audience.[4] Yet in "Big My Secret, but It's Bandaged," Swenson seems even more concerned with Dickinson's responses to "improvements" visited upon her poems' physical beings and writes of Dickinson's reaction to the editorial tamperings that weakened the poetic body in print: "she hated it that editors not only raided her poems and changed them but also gave them labels. They needed no names. When experiencing the full reality of something alive, one does not, to begin with, say its name" (*MWW* 143).

Poems such as "Bleeding," experimental collections such as *Iconographs*, are among the reminders that Swenson regarded poetry as physical enactment. Like Dickinson, like Blake, she approached the matter of poetry and

4. See http://emilydickinson.org/safe/zhb74b2.html. The first critical exhibition of the Dickinson Electronic Archives was "Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem." The archives feature critical editions of writings by the Dickinson family, poetic responses to Emily Dickinson, bibliographies, out of print and other resources.

its physicality complexly, refusing to allow her monumental understandings to devolve into critical food fights that could force unnecessary choices and false valuations. Even when you are dealing with words, Swenson knew, different choreographies of a poem's elements—its spaces, its lines, its word groups, its horizontal, vertical, even diagonal arrangements—can lead to radically different emphases and thus to contrasting, even oppositional, understandings of the meanings. Her collection *Iconographs*, actually consists of her "manuscripts . . . photo offset and reduced" and reproduced the way she made them on the typewriter—in order to "be interesting to the eye." Part of this "playfulness with poetry" extended to the cover, which she designed herself "to suggest a giant typewriter ribbon" (*MWW* 119).

Swenson wrote, "I have not meant the poems to depend upon, or depend from, their shapes or their frames; these were thought of only after the whole language structure and behavior was complete in each instance. What the poems say or show, their way of doing it with language, is the main thing" (*Iconographs* 87).

At the end of *Iconographs*, a book that is made so that its size conforms to standard letter-size typewriter paper (8 ½ x 11 inches), Swenson explained in a note: "With the physical senses we meet the world and each other—a world of objects, human and otherwise, where words on a page are objects, too. The first instrument to make contact, it seems to me, and the quickest to report it, is the eye. The poems in *Iconographs*, with their profiles, or space patterns, or other graphic emphases, signal that they are to be seen, as well as read and heard, I suppose" (87). Like Blake, like Dickinson, Swenson has had much of the physicalities stripped away in print reproductions; as she says in her 1977 interview with Cornelia Draves and Mary Jane Fortunato, "you can't usually get the printer to do what you want him to do" (*MWW* 119).

When I began to write this essay, I followed the standard protocols and reviewed some of Swenson's poems and volumes—*Iconographs*, *Poems to Solve*, *In Other Words*, and *Nature*, among them. As I read reviews, articles, and book chapters about her to determine how she and her work speak to the responsibilities of a poet and of poetry, the commonalities and similarities of responses from a range of audiences, with all their individualities and differences, became more and more profound. As I started to read a number of critics—such as some of my very favorites who were sitting right there in the audience in Logan, Utah, when this essay was first imagined and delivered as a talk—I thought, This is wonderful. It is, as Elizabeth Bishop might say, "marvelous to wake up together" to the wonders, the delights, of May Swenson's poetry. And as my first audience heard that June

in 2004, and as my readers can see, in working on the essay birthed by that occasion, I turned to Swenson herself, and yes, her delights, as well as her harrowing insights, such as this one in the sixth song of her volume:

> The one you least suspect
> is guilty
> .....
> You are dining with
> a cannibal
> .....
>
> What if you too
> dare to tamper
> with the trigger
> of life and death?

To conclude this particular reverie on poetry and its responsibilities, on the poet and her responsibilities, on we the people and our responsibilities, all considerations that seem ever more urgent, more now as I am writing the essay than when I delivered the talk, and probably more urgent still upon reading the essay than on its writing, I decided to go to a particular set of May Swenson's manuscripts, those of a prose poem published in *Quarterly West*, and consider that work in light of her essay "A Poem Happens to Me" and the importance of audience:

> I do not know why I write poems or what makes me write them. Often, when I want *to write a poem*, I cannot—or, if I stubbornly sit down and write something anyway, I discover sooner or later that it is *not* a poem. I suspect this may be because, by concerning oneself with making a poem, one is so conscious of going through the correct motions of doing so, that the spirit of the creation refuses to enter the hard, premeditated clay, and, when it is finished, all the physical parts may have been admirably fashioned, but no passion is there to animate the figure.
>
> It does not breathe.
>
> It is like making a violin complete in every way, except that one can't get music from it.
>
> On the other hand, it sometimes happens that I am unwilling to write the poem but it forces itself from me without permission. A poem that happens in this way will often be inexplicable

> to myself, as to source, content, or significance. Months later, or years later, such a poem may "dawn on me," and I know for the first time what it is I have written. Sometimes I agree with my own observation, and sometimes I think it absurd. (*MWW* 75)

Emily Dickinson asked Thomas Wentworth Higginson if her verse was "alive," if it "breathed" (*Letters of Emily Dickinson*, letter 260). The witness provided by Swenson's manuscripts as she worked through "At the Poetry Reading" suggests that the poem forced itself on Swenson and that audience was a key technology in facilitating its delivery. The manuscripts depicting that poem's evolution tell quite a story.

The prose poem begins in a handwritten draft, placed and dated "L.A. Feb 18 '77." With Ann Stafford, she attended a reading by James Merrill. In the poem, she is part of his audience, but the first thing she records is not his subject, nor his manner of presentation, but the "dark red" glossy "nails" that "are tulips" of another audience member. Described as "hard red-purple cheeks," "large cherry-colored scarabs," the "ten notched precious articles exquisitely marked" center the tableau—the painting in words that absorb a learned audience member who cannot seem to focus on Merrill's presentation, though she emphatically declares, "But I really love his *work*."

AT THE POETRY READING

A gray suit. A grave voice. The hour seems an age.
The lectern is a base on which is mounted the stodgy bust
of a terribly famous poet. My eyes furtively slip among
the seated congregation and alight upon a little stage
I can see at a slant, down front in the second row, lit, as it
happens, from the lectern above. On a black velvet lap,
smooth palms are loosely basketed, being held very still.
Extending the ends of the fingers, ten matched ovals, of a
marvelous sharpness and length, have the gloss of tulip petals,
or of those big cherry-colored beetles with convex backs.
They are kept carefully apart so as not to be marred.

A serene face. chin uptilted, is on guard over the tableau.
Back erect beside her escort (he also seated rigid and correct
in creaseless suit) she divides her beam of attention between
the intoning mouth behind the micriphone up there, and the whit
Still Life in her lap. I contemplate the tableau on the little
stage with increasing admiration, and I make these notes, not
having to look at, or listen to, what tediously proceeds on
the large stage:

> The rare, the sacrificial art of growing nails. Harder than gardening, than embroidery, than sport. Demanding discipline almost saintlike. Asks restraint, asks instinctive avoidance of contact, or of the slightest unplanned gesture. An occupation personal and dedicated, a work that can't be hired; constant supervision is required. Constant love and care called for by the artist. The craft consists simply in letting them grow, and without distortion or deviation, in order to develop precise prefigured outlines, each one, so that separate, yet sibling, miniature masterpieces result.
>
> But the growth never halts. Although the goal is perfection, as soon as reached, it shifts. Each day the ten must be restored, reshaped, recolored, buffed, blown on, carefully refloated in air to dry. Then kept intact, controlled, not to injure themselves or each other, not to grope in forgetful, impulsive frolic. Such letting-go might cause damage costing long and critical repair.

Larger print as above <—

> I make these notes, and do not have to look at, or listen to, what tediously proceeds upon the stage up there. I list the rules the art requires:
>
> 1. Never scratch. 2. Don't shake hands. 3. At table, handle cutlery with care. In fact, for safety's sake, eat rarely. 4. To dress or disrobe, employ a maid. Especially so for bathing, brushing hair, or any self-care using the hands as tools. 5. Obviously taboo: cooking, or other household chores. 6. Exercise—golf, tennis, any game except, perhaps, bridge or backgammon—should not be chanced. 7. For driving, best use a chauffer. 8. Recommended for sleeping: padded, lined-with-lightweight-flannel gloves, and ask the maid gently to fit them on. CAUTION: Emotion can overturn the strict practice on which accomplishment depends. Thus, 9. Never sleep

with anyone. Or with any thing. Such as a too-solid pillow, a cloth doll, a cat. 10. Do not caress any creature or object, not even yourself. Always remember, your immaculate breakable claws require your prime love and guardianship. 11. Miscellaneous Cautions: (Add to them as experience dictates)— (a) Playing piano not allowed. (b) Visiting retreat or spa is good. (c) No hiking. (Well, maybe, if wearing flats—unless nails of the feet are also being crafted.) (d) Swimming is O.K.

She handles her hands in her lap as if they are priceless, her awareness constant as to their posture, wherever her eyes may be fixed. Kept slightly apart, the fingers with their fresh groomed nails, inch-long slick points reflecting light, empurpled, gleaming, are pampered pets, posed in graceful tableau, ten matched and brilliant cameos that may not touch.

Rule 12: Do not clasp in prayer.

Ripples of movement in the audience, a loosening and shifting of heads and necks, murmurs of exclamation. Finally, the applause-- polite at first, then vigorous. Everyone automatically smacks palms together. The velvet lap unhooks its knees, the fabulous hands lift. With exquisite slow-motion pretense at meeting palm to palm, they noiselessly clap.

The occasion of the poetry reading becomes an occasion for a reverie on poetry and art, and Swenson's characteristic good humor inflects her analytical reflection on artistic production, as she compares the staging of poetic language with the staging of the trivial art of manicure. Through ten different drafts, Swenson describes the great care the elegant audience member has taken to insure her perfectly sculpted nails. Seven out of ten of the drafts, produced between 1977 and 1986, begin by focusing Swenson's audience on those nails. The seemingly ludicrous comparison of a monumental poet and his work that "breathes" and will breathe for generations upon generations to come with an anonymous audience member and her easily defaceable, perpetually degradable "art" is both hilarious and profound.

A superficial reading might lead one to wonder why Swenson is being uncharacteristically uncharitable, even a little mean. But her first draft of this prose poem makes clear that her subject is the audience "seen while listening to a poetry reading." Thus it is not May Swenson's own judgment but one "seen," one that pronounces the "presentation by a terribly famous poet," in this case James Merrill, "tedious." Swenson reports what she thinks she observes—a woman who can appreciate only the art of her own nails, not the art of Merrill's words.

Important, too, is that the poem that evolved into the polished typescript with instructions for the printer was no longer a prose poem about the particular poetry reading that forced the poem into being by the particular

poet Merrill. Rather, the typescript poem evolved through numerous hybrid typescript and handwritten drafts into a prose poem about the pomp and circumstance and self-importance of some audiences and some literary events. The poem is about a fear of experience itself, a fear of living.

It is about a fear of the fact that, as Muriel Rukeyser remarked:

> Art is not a world, but a knowing of the world. Art prepares us.
>
> Art is practiced by the artist and the audience. It is not a means to an end, unless that end is the total imaginative experience. . . . Art and nature are imitations, not of each other, but of the same thing—both images of the real, the spectral and vivid reality that employs all means. If we fear it in art, we fear it in nature, and our fear brings it on ourselves in the most unanswerable ways.
>
> The implications for society and for the individual are far-reaching.
>
> People want this speech, this immediacy. They need it. The fear of poetry is a complicated and civilized repression of that need. We wish to be told, in the most memorable way, what we have been meaning all along. (26)

Sometimes the subject at hand bears repeating. Because of murky, unclear subjects, language is repeatedly emptied, eviscerated, stolen from us in our public sphere. "Language is not only a tool in poetry; it is its very being. In a poem, Subject is not presented by means of language; but Language is the thing presented with the aid of subject." The subject here calls our attention to the importance of poetry and what is missing when audiences and poets are there to tell, to be seen, to receive plaudits rather than to let poetry do its work, that of "sacred mathematics" (*Iconographs* 86), "to incorporate infinitude and set up comprehensible models of it within our little minds" (*MWW* 93), to give "form a body" (*MWW* 77), and "help" us "stay human" (*MWW* 101).

So what happens when the poet adopts "an un-self-centered attitude"—one "with the object of understanding his audience and revealing *it* to itself and himself," one that does not say "Look, here I am!" but "See, there you," the audience, "are…"? Occupying that position and inhabiting that sense of audience as technology, as breath, a poet reminds an audience of our connectedness—flesh to spirit; lover to lover; friend to friend; friend to foe. We are not abstractions in this material world, and we need all the help we can get to "stay human." A poet's greatest responsibility is to teach audiences that, and, as Swenson well knew, such learning is not philosophical but experiential. Swenson's brood, the many children she recorded in her family's book, repeat over and over, "See, there you are, human."

Material Girl

May Swenson's Logopoetic Materialism

Cynthia Hogue

Language for the poet is what pigment is for the painter.
May Swenson

I want to open with an anecdote about a material object, a book that is illustrative of the bifurcated history of reception of May Swenson's work. Buried in my past lies the history of my heterosexual blind spots, a piece of which was uncannily returned to me when I began the process of writing this essay. I owned, I knew, a couple of May Swenson books from my student days, but what I had forgotten was that one of them, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, was not actually mine, but one I'd nicked I don't remember when from my mother's collection. It was a gift from one of her high-school English students, for whom my mother had been a favorite teacher, and who had been a best friend of mine before life separated us. Anne likely bought this book in 1968 when it came out in paperback and for some reason, after graduation in 1969, dropped the book off at my father's diner, with a note on the inside cover: "Mr. Hogue, please give this to Mrs. H. I think she would like it."

It is possible that my friend had in mind the Swedish translations included at the end of that collection, since my mother was the daughter of a Swedish-speaking Lutheran minister and his wife (Swenson's parents were also Swedish Lutherans before their conversion to Mormonism). It seems unlikely to me that my friend was trying to convey a subtle message

about her identity to my mother, since my mother was no more capable than I at the time of decoding Swenson's sensual, homoerotic imagery. I pick up this book *now*, of course, and happen upon the trace of the girl my friend had been almost forty years ago, a closeted sixteen-year-old lesbian reading a major poet whose "complex positioning of her sexual identity," as Mark Doty observes of Swenson's capacity to write both delicately and forthrightly, is not "a matter of being in the closet but rather of a thrilling dance of reticence and self-disclosure" (89).

Which is to say, except for those who could see, her sexual identity was (in)visible: like the Purloined Letter, hidden in plain sight.[1] As Kirsten Hotelling Zona tells us, Swenson, like her friend Elizabeth Bishop, was a lesbian poet who refused to lodge herself "within a growing field of woman-identified poetry" during the rise of second-wave feminism.[2] In the tantalizing biography of Swenson in photos, *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*,[3] the photographs tell the story about which the words are discreet. But as Teresa de Lauretis observes of Western culture historically, lesbian (in)visibility is a problem as well as a choice, because the speaking subject is still so often assumed to be male (even when the assumption is not that the subject is heterosexual: what de Lauretis terms "the tropism of hommo-sexuality"). The refrain of so many women poets of Swenson's generation (and also of their modernist foremothers) to posit a culturally situated poetic subject is arguably a symptom, at least in part, of their

1. Although Doty does not comment on the heterosexual blind spot that rendered lesbian display in Swenson's work unreadable to heterosexual readers in her day, we come to a very similar conclusion about the play of self-disclosure in her poetry, what I'm calling lesbian (in)visibility, and even a nearly identical comment (albeit Doty's, made five years earlier): "From the perspective of 1999, it looks as if May Swenson were hiding in plain sight" (Ibid.). In response to a number of invitations for inclusion in such anthologies as *Amazon Poetry* (1975), as Sue Russell recounts, May Swenson "expressed her pleasure at the possibility of having certain poems understood in their proper context, but she was apparently less happy about the implication of being [identified solely as] a 'lesbian poet'" (131). For a discussion of Swenson's ambivalence about being identified as a *woman* poet, see Sue Russell, "A Mysterious and Lavish Power." On the aesthetics of confessionalism vs. Swenson's (as well as Moore's and Bishop's) more reticent poetry, see Neil Arditi, "In the Bodies of Words."
2. This quote comes from Zona's afterword in *Dear Elizabeth* (26). For the full discussion of Swenson's relationship to Bishop (both poetic and personal), and the first full critical treatment of Swenson's work that has been published in book form, see Zona's monograph, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson*, 95–119. For an earlier, nuanced presentation of some of the Bishop-Swenson letters on which Zona builds, see Richard Howard, "Elizabeth Bishop–May Swenson Correspondence." Howard characterizes Bishop's and Swenson's epistolary exchanges from 1963–65 as "a kind of causerie between the two lesbian poets about their situation as lesbians, as poets" (171).
3. Eds. Knudson and Bigelow; hereafter, *MS*.

struggle for literary and cultural respect from men as *poets* rather than *poetesses* or *lady poets*.[4]

In her essay, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," de Lauretis contends that it is very difficult to devise "strategies of representation which will, in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen*" (qtd. in de Lauretis, *How Do I Look?* 224). Swenson's decision to remain (in)visible was thus culturally as well as personally determined, as suggested by the example of some of the commentators who still gloss lines of (in)visible, homoerotic specificity, as generally poetic—for example,

> I milknip your two Blue-skeined
> blown Rose beauties, too, to sniff
> their berries' blood, up stiff
> pink tips

Mitchell writes, "Like Hopkins, Swenson takes pleasure in enumerating and listing, in rolling out the scrolls of Creation. To mouth is not only to take into the mouth but also to utter, to proclaim" (xix–xx). This reading of Swenson's lines isn't so much wrong as quaint, determinedly steering heterosexual readers away from acknowledging that the details are homoerotic or that heterosexual men are thus put in the position of identifying with a lesbian lover. But the passage unsettles the "normative" center and any "normalizing" (or universalizing) understanding of the passage. In the twenty-first century, as we begin collectively to restore Swenson's distinguished reputation, as well as to place her poetry in the context of her lived experience, what we discover is that among the poetic riches this great poet offers us is the playfully bold manner in which her oeuvre has been contributing to altering the inherited "standard of vision" all along—right under, as it were, our collective *no*'s.

To give a brief example, Swenson's early poem "The Centaur" has for the most part been read as no more than a delightful depiction of childhood play. But surely such lines as the following suggest a sly performance of the charade of masculinity as well:

4. In addition to being ambivalent about identifying herself as a "woman poet" in the second half of her career, Swenson felt that coming out as a lesbian poet might have negatively affected her career, especially in the years before second-wave feminism, according to her longtime partner and literary executor, R. R. Knudson, who commented on the subject during a discussion at the 2004 May Swenson Symposium at Utah State University.

> But when, with my brother's jackknife,
> I had cut me a long limber horse
> with a good thick knob for a head,
> ……
> I'd straddle and canter him fast. . . .[5]

Capturing the imaginary freedom that precedes assuming one's position on one side or the other of the gender divide in the symbolic order, the girl in Swenson's poem crosses and confuses discrete categories of sexual identity, which are, by implication, as mythic, fantasized, and constructed as the centaur itself. The girl is doubled—implicitly completing herself (she both is and rides her "horse")—(w)hole.

The status of her lack is rendered ambiguous because of the presence of the doubled fetish: although she "dismounts" the "thick knob" of "Rob Roy" between her legs and "smooths" her dress, her mother still asks: "*What's that in your pocket?*" The girl answers, "*Just my knife*," admitting in the space of the poem that she has supplemented "Rob Roy" not with her own "knife," but with her brother's, which "weighted my pocket / and stretched my dress awry" (*TTP* 238). Seeing her daughter still "awry" of the conventions of normative femininity, the mother tries to teach her daughter how better to look the part (in effect, the masquerade of femininity): "*Go tie back your hair*." But the daughter—who has suggestively explored whether the grass is greener on the "other" side ("*Why is your mouth all green?*" the mother then asks)—finally leaves in question the status of her identity: "*Rob Roy, he pulled some clover / as we crossed the field*, I told her" (*TTP* 239).

Is she or isn't she a centaur? That is the question that the poem quietly, playfully refrains from answering. With its regularized, mainly unrhymed tercets and such casual slant rhyme to close the poem, "The Centaur" exceeds the New Critical straitjacket in which it masquerades (in)visibly and by which it is apparently framed. To read the lines of this poem, which is to read a lesbian subject writing into the cultural field of her (in)visibility, we have to read between them. In its configuring of hybrid identity, Swenson's "Centaur" anticipates postmodern reconfigurations of agency and liberating new subjectivities (queer and cyborg, for example).[6]

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5. May Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (hereafter, *TTP*), 237.
6. I am paraphrasing an insightful point made by Michael Davidson about modernism and the importance of the inventions of the typewriter, telegraph, and telephone, which all variously separated voice from body: "technology could produce new hybrid identities in which to reconfigure agency. Whether this could lead to . . . new gender categories (cyborg feminism, queer identities) in the late twentieth [century] is still open for debate" (229). See also Zona,

A later Swenson poem, "The Cross Spider," creatively enacts but also critically interrogates that reconfigured agency. The poem makes a trenchant analogy between New Criticism's aspiration to aesthetic autonomy from social context and science's drive for pure inquiry, free of consequential considerations. "The Cross Spider" is on one level a metatextual contemplation of poetry, particularly alluding to Whitman's exploratory Noiseless Patient Spider and Dickinson's Spider Artists. At first, Arabella, the cross spider who was sent into space by NASA to study the effects of weightlessness seems liberated:

> Free where no wind was, no floor, or wall,
> afloat eccentric on immaculate black,
> she tossed a strand straight as light,
> hoping to snag on perihelion and invent
> the Edge, the Corner and the Knot.
> .....
> "Act as if no center exists,"
> Arabella advised herself. Thus inverted
> was deformed the labyrinth of grammar.[7]

When the center doesn't hold, she gamely tells herself to pretend it was never there. The weaving of the web—revealed syntactically to be aligned with the web of grammar (and its warp of gendered symmetry)—is wittily disrupted in this passage. The lines quoted above are both literally and tonally without the gravity upon which the center's "grammar" depends.

As the normative syntactical relations among words are skewed, the poem inscribes the very de-formation and inversion of schematic ordering that it thematizes. Poetic syntax begins to mime the "crazy web" that Arabella weaves in space: "Dizzyness completed it. A half-made, half-mad / asymmetric unnameable jumble, the New / became the Wen. On Witch it sit wirligiggly" (*IOW* 40). Acknowledging the dangers of leaving conventional structures, the grounding that gravity gives, Swenson punningly inverts the modernist aesthetic to "make it new" into a question of timing. "Wen" is *when*, as in *When, if not now?* But it is also the Old

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who argues that "It is precisely Swenson's invocation of identity at the liminal site *between* bodies, between self and other, in the slippage between representation and reality, that marks her portrait of selfhood as contingent" (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 125).

7. May Swenson, "The Cross Spider," *In Other Words* (hereafter, IOW) 39.

English rune for the sound of *w*—the name of the sound itself. With airily deft wordplay, the alliterative w's accumulating to sweep the cobwebs of old patterns of thinking away, Swenson explores what happens when the "proper" order of things is suspended.

On this level, the text's high-wire (im)balancing act exposes the interested groundlessness of mainstream charges that innovative art questioning inherited structures of thought is "half-made" (or poorly made) or "half-mad." "The Cross Spider" wryly implies that this work has been tagged culturally with a deviant femaleness—both *witchy* and *cross* (*-eyed? -dressed?* or just plain *mad?*). That suspicion, the poem suggests, is because a new syntax for a *wen* identity has been unrecognizable, "unnameable" within dominant culture: a "wen" is also a cyst (*sist-er?*), that is, another de-forming aspect of the poem's body, one that resists return to a sense of wholeness, however illusory (in essence, the castration complex).[8]

Thus, "The Cross Spider" marshals its wit to serious purpose, countering assumptions that linguistic play is all surface-dazzle with no depth. In so doing, the poem astutely notes the cost of technological advances that sacrifice the living (both social and sociable) in the name of science. Arabella is alone in the cosmos, and both her own experiment in form and that of which she was the subject end with her demise: "No other thing or Fly alive. / Afloat in the Black Whole, Arabella / crumple-died. Experiment frittered" (*IOW* 40). In this closing, Swenson's playfulness dies away with the spider, which has been objectified, we suddenly realize, as a "thing," an object of detached scientific inquiry caring nothing for her subjective agency but only for its experiments. By personifying Arabella, Swenson compels us to ask why *we* should care, in our quest (whether for pure knowledge or *the new*), about the consequences of actions taken for a purpose as nebulous as *progress*. Progress in whose eyes? Swenson asks via this poem.

Swenson refrains from answering definitively. Among those possible answers that she contemplates, a poetic inquiry with which she counters scientific inquiry, is one suggested by the fact that "The Cross Spider" precedes a series on NASA and space exploration during the 1980s, "Shuttles." The series begins in celebration and fascination but ends with the tragedy of the Challenger disaster:

8. That Swenson may be playing with and revising structures of female/lesbian subjectivity and agency is suggested by Knudson's and Bigelow's recounting that Swenson read extensively in Freudian theory, as well as texts both on the psychology of women and dream analysis (*MS* 65–66).

> By July NASA conceded that the crew, at "Go throttle up!"
> had to have known the lift-off was fatal. Recorded by
> the "black box" finally recovered form Challenger's debris,
> Commander's voice was heard: He said, "Uh-oh." It took
> ten seconds to hit water. *They were alive. They knew.*
> (*IOW* 47)

The epistemological insight is excruciatingly timebound—ten seconds—representing neither a scientific nor aesthetic investigation but the age-old knowledge of mortality: the end of the poem coincides with the end of the astronauts' lives. Swenson was no Luddite, but she was forceful in analyzing the cost of sacrificing agency to inquiry, whether in science or art; mirroring "the New," her poem reflects the failings of New Criticism with deceptively playful methods, demonstrating that "the Wen" artist cannot create in a void.[9]

Swenson's career is characterized by such innovative formal inquiry as we see in "The Cross Spider"—what Alicia Ostriker terms Swenson's "exploratory forms" ("May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" 224)—as much as by its often edgy themes. It is the relation of the material world to the materiality of her poetry (the play of patterned shapes, the schisms she introduces between form and content, word and world) to which I want to turn now.

As Kirsten Zona recounts, when Swenson was asked about influences in her life, she "spoke most often of Moore," and central to her praise was the fact that Moore's work was rarely about self-expression and never about either "self-pity" or "self-aggrandizement" (*MM* 121–22). As Swenson makes clear in the following passage however it is not only Moore's self-restraint but also her formal quality that instructed Swenson: "[Moore] continues to teach us that poetry is not constructed with ideas or sensations or revelations or passions, though these are its seductive spots and glitters, but that instead it depends on a strong, limber, complex, organic trellis of technique—in short, it is made with *language*."[10] Swenson's constructivist insight about this "revolutionary of form" points to the fact

9. My thanks to Alicia Ostriker for reading an earlier draft of this essay and raising questions in an email about my explication of "The Cross Spider"; her questions were crucial to revising this section. "It seems to me that Arabella here is being manipulated by NASA into trying to create poetry in a void—and she fails, and dies," Ostriker remarked. "So NASA might stand for New Criticism or New Critical ideas that a poem is a pure object in space unconnected to poet or audience."

10. From *Made with Words* (hereafter *MWW*), 88.

that the creative ground of Moore's poetry is its dislodging of the connection between meaning and poetic material, which Moore accomplished by means of syllabic patterning that distributed the words in relation to theme arbitrarily rather than in coordination.[11]

It is something analogous to this function in Swenson's work that I've tried to tease out in my discussions of "The Centaur" and "The Cross Spider"—a more disjunctive, technical aspect of her poetry that I term *logopoetic materiality*. *Logopoetic*, of course, alludes to Pound's third kind of poetry (*melopoeia*, built on sound, and *phanopoeia*, built on image, being the other two), which Pound defines as "the dance of the intellect among words" (Pound 25). But Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that *logopoeia* was the term Pound initially developed, as it happens, with Marianne Moore's (and Mina Loy's) cerebral, analytic, and archly ironic, even antilyric poetry in mind. His notion of logopoeia has been critically reinterpreted to signify the attempt to bring into poetry a diagnostic element, with some of the thick social analysis evident in the prose of such realist novelists as Flaubert and James. But, DuPlessis contends, following Carolyn Burke, we should recall that Moore's logopoetic poetry was written from "the subject position of the New Woman" (albeit without identifying poetic subjects as such—a withholding that women poets of Swenson's generation followed as well). Moore's work questioned and subverted (or inverted and involuted) the "gender assumptions" of the genre—the often triangulated, heterosexual "master plots" embedded in the lyric ideologically (DuPlessis, "Corpses of Poesy," 77).[12]

Swenson has been justly celebrated for her daring, formal experiments with the materiality of poetry, which extend Moore's own logopoetic investigations, but as with Moore, in order fully to appreciate the Swensonian "dance of the intellect among words," I think it is crucial to place her poetics in a materialist, cultural reading. To give an example, the poem "Bleeding" is a complex interface of textual, thematic, and material elements, which seems to conform to New Criticism's call for the aesthetic object's autonomy from context.[13] First collected in Swenson's most

11. In *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions*, Bonnie Costello writes that Moore's syllabic "measure works independently of statement, allowing statement its own order while establishing a new order in which words are liberated from syntax" (181).

12. See also Carolyn Burke's foundational essay on Moore's and Loy's gender and genre innovation, "Getting Spliced," 98–121. For extensive feminist analyses of how Moore's work undercuts the inherited, gender fictions in the lyric, see, for example, Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore*, and Cynthia Hogue, "Less Is Moore."

13. See, for example, Swenson's New Critical response to a question about "poets interpreting their poems": "I think the poem should be autonomous and should explain itself" (*MWW* 117).

formally radical book, *Iconographs*, "Bleeding" is a sadomasochist fable about relational and yet paradoxically detached violence (a detachment that the poem's own autonomy from circumstance might be said to make visible).[14] The pattern is epitomized by an unfeeling and destructive knife on the one hand and a self-hating, self-blaming cut on the other. The poem is structured as an allegorical conversation between the knife and the cut that at first seems almost predictably gendered. As Ostriker observes, however, although the "dry superiority to feeling is a major sign of desirable masculinity," and both "bleeding" and "feeling" have long been culturally associated with "natural" femininity, what's striking about this poem is that it's careful not to propose a gender-specific narrative. Rather, it investigates, as Ostriker puts it, "a universal form of sickness."[15]

The "knife" is an empiricist who feels only what it can confirm tactically ("I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in"),[16] but the knife is unconcerned with the consequences of its actions. The "cut" is a cognitively dissociative metaphysician who only thinks it knows what it feels when it's in pain ("I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.").[17] Although the word "feel" occurs three times in the lines I've just quoted, each time the connotation is different: the knife's use of "feel" indicates sensory perception (I feel wetness); the cut's first use of "feel" is analogous to "think," whereas the second occurrence seems to mean emotional feeling. As such, the aural patterning of repeated sounds (mainly the long-vowelled, plosive combination of "bleed" and "bleeding," contrasted with the softer, short-vowelled combinations of "messy" and "wet") comprises something of a compulsion for textual repetition.

Visually mirroring the knife's (dis)association from the wound, the typographic, jagged "gash" runs down the course of the poem on the page, disrupting its smooth, poetic surface and introducing gaps in the lines into which meaning accrues. It is the very absence of connection that

14. May Swenson, *Iconographs* (hereafter, *I*), *13*.
15. See also Zona's response to "Bleeding"; she describes the poem as an "obvious" critical commentary "on gender inequality and heterosexist desire" (*SR* 123).
16. The irony of this unfeeling "feeling" is underscored even more in *TTP*, in which Swenson included a revised version of "Bleeding." In the later version, the break in that line occurs earlier, and the gap between the parts of the line has widened: "I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in" (*TTP* 104). Swenson significantly revises this poem by typographically reconfiguring the "gash," a technique she surely learned from Moore, who among published versions of the same poem could radically revise a poem without changing one word, simply by redistributing the syllabics.
17. This line, too, is revised significantly in the later version to emphasize a sense of compulsion, which seems internalized, "I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut" (*TTP* 104).

the typographic, linear disconnection ironically emphasizes. As the verbal repetitions imply, meaning shifts with context even if the words don't change. There are limits to what we can comprehend in language, as well as to what we can know by means of our senses: the knife and the cut are in conversational relation but not in real communication. As too often with those on one side or the other of debates about violence, the knife and the cut may be literally on the same page but they are clearly not in the same experiential, ontological paradigm.

The dynamics of violence may seem, as we contemplate history, both universally human and timeless, but I want to suggest that Swenson's analysis in this poem is socially and temporally specific. Swenson discussed the poems in *Iconographs* as "visual metaphors," in which she was "trying to find a pattern, or have a vision, the power of the unconscious" (*MWW* 116). I've been performing a very close reading of "Bleeding" in order to suggest speculatively that the visual metaphor it constructs is of a country divided literally over the issue of violence (much, I might add, like our country today over Iraq). From the "power of the unconscious" the text accesses through its patterns of repetition—bleed, bleed, wet, wet, mess, mess, blood, stop, come out, sink in, coming out, sinking in, stop, stop, feel, feel, little, little—emerges a nexus of insistent perceptions, what we might call *felt-thoughts*: stop sinking in; stop the bleeding; stop the wet (Vietnam War); feel little (I would gloss this double-taking phrase as an invocation to *feel humble*).

My point here is not that Swenson is writing an antiwar poem as overtly as her contemporary Robert Lowell, but that the poem is more complex and multileveled than a gendered explication elicits. "Bleeding" contemplates the phenomenon of violence, investigating the mentality that makes it possible. "Bleeding" so insistently recirculates the same words in differing contexts that the repetition uncovers verbal ploys, the psychology of which the poem exposes: circular reasoning to justify unconscionable action, disassociation that permits the knife not only to continue wounding, but also not to "know" that it is wounding the cut, and the general confusion of feeling for thinking most evident around issues of violence and war. In the emotional intensification that repetition both signifies and generates, we can decipher the fraught trace of the materialist context. To bring that trace into awareness, I have been following the tracks of repeated words that occur in textual but not contextual specificity, allowing a historically situated reading to emerge. DuPlessis advocates such a close reading practice, terming it "social philology," which

entails tracking in the poetry semantic and phonemic slippages, phonic counterplays, buried puns, and double-taking phrases, among other poetic practices, in order to apprehend the connection between the author's intention ("psychology") and the "social history" of the "author's location" (*Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures* 24–25 and 1–28, passim).

Iconographs was published in 1970, a time of great social upheaval and protest: in full swing were the civil-rights movement and second-wave feminism, as well as a nascent gay-rights movement that Stonewall signaled—the first militant gay protest of inequity, which erupted in 1969 in Greenwich Village, where Swenson lived; her cultural surroundings resonate in the double-take on "coming out" in the poem. All of this was taking place during a time when there were huge protests of the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy had both been assassinated in 1968. That Swenson deeply felt and considered the impact of their loss and the violence of their assassinations, including the implications of King's loss for the civil-rights movement, is confirmed by the two elegies she wrote for them, "Black Tuesday" and "The Lowering," on facing pages in *Iconographs*. Much of the first section of the collection, in fact, ranges across various references to and contemplations of current events—for example, of the "space race," the draft, and above-ground nuclear testing (in "The Shape of Death," "white blossom belches" from a "pillared cloud" bursting with "sickly black" ashes [*I* 27]).[18] Although she would shift its placement in *Things Taking Place* eight years later, Swenson's placement of "Bleeding" as the threshold poem in a collection published at the end of a violent and tumultuous decade resonates with the "power of the unconscious"—its way of knowing, its dreamlike powers to work through—that she tries to access through this shape-shifting logopoetics.

Iconographs also suggests that Swenson was conversant with an avant-garde movement the center of which was shifting, because of the rise of fascism in Europe, from Paris to New York around the time that Swenson was herself moving to New York from Utah in the 1930s. Knudson and Bigelow tell us that there she met intellectual émigré artists (Anzia Yezierska, among others), worked for the Federal Writers' Project, and soon also met one of Marianne Moore's great supporters, the wealthy editor and

18. This contextualizing summary, which began as mere speculation about Swenson's political engagement, was confirmed at the 2004 May Swenson Symposium at Utah State University by Knudson, who remarked that Swenson "often spoke of politics with [unnamed friend]," and that her elegies for Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., among other political poems in *Iconographs*, stemmed from a deeply felt sense of political engagement.

writer Alfred Kreymborg (who would be instrumental in helping Swenson as well). Generally she began finding her way to a community that included an artistic and intellectual gay subculture and proletariat and expressionist artists. In the 1950s and 1960s, Swenson worked as a manuscript reader at the premier publisher of the avant-garde, New Directions, which was bringing out books by modernist, objectivist, and Black Mountain poets. Thus, she may have read materialist-minded poets like objectivist George Oppen, who began, after a twenty-year hiatus, to write and publish with New Directions throughout the 1960s. Swenson herself had already published in the *New Directions* magazine in the 1950s with fellow second-generation modernists Lorine Niedecker and Kenneth Rexroth, as well as with one of the "founding fathers" of modernism, William Carlos Williams, among others.

Always interested in modernist collage, Swenson allowed her work to open to the accidental or incidental in ways that other mainstream poets did not. She writes in her afterword to *Iconographs*, "To have material and mold evolve together and become a symbiotic whole. To cause an instant object-to-eye encounter with each poem even before it is read word-afterword. To have simultaneity as well as sequence. To make an existence in space, as well as in time, for the poem. These have been, I suppose, the impulses behind the typed shapes and frames invented for this collection" (*I* 86).

The improvisational moment of visual and aural perception suggests not only a familiarity with the younger New York School poets, abstract expressionism, and action painting (while her experiments with electronic sound recordings at Purdue indicate at least a passing interest in John Cage), but also a contemplation of the first-generation avant garde (cubism, Dadaism) that was investigating through art such discoveries in science as Einstein's theory of relativity. Swenson never aligned herself with the avant garde, but she infused some of its techniques and concerns into her own work and shared its interest in perspectival simultaneity of moment and sequence, as well as the creative possibilities (and dangers) generated by technology.[19]

I want to close by examining an example of this interest at some length. Swenson's poem "The DNA Molecule" is a response to James Watson's bestselling account of the discovery of DNA structure, *The*

19. Like so many aspects of Swenson's work, her approach to science and technology has yet to receive full critical consideration, but see, for example, Richard Howard, "Banausics," 423–42, for a reading of Swenson's poem "August 19, Pad 19," that raises the issue thematically.

THE DNA MOLECULE
THE DNA MOLECULE
THE DNA MOLECULE
is The Nude Descending a Staircase
a circular one.
See the undersurfaces
of the spiral
treads and
the spaces
in between.

She is descending and at the same time
ascending and she moves around herself. For
she is the staircase "a protoplasmic framework
an internal scaffolding
that twists and turns."

She is a double helix mounting and dismounting
around the swivel of her imaginary spine. The Nude
named DNA can be constructed as a model with matches and
a ribbon of tape. Be sure to use only 4 colors on 2 white
strands of twistable tape. "Only matches of complementary
colors may be placed opposite each other. The pairs
are to be red and green and yellow and blue."

Make your model as high as the Empire
State Building and you have an acceptable
replica of The Nude.
But and this is harder you must make her move
in a continuous coil
an alpha helix a double spiral
downward and upward at once
and you must make her increase while at the same
time occupying the same field.
She must be made "to maintain a basic topography"
changing yet remaining stable

if she is to perform her function which is to produce
and reproduce the microsphere.
Such a sphere is invisible to but ominpresent
in the naked eye of The Nude.
It contains "a central region and an outer membrane"
making it able to divide "to make exact copies of
itself without limit."

The Nude has "the capacity for
replication and transcription" of
all genesis. She ingests and
regurgitates the genetic material
it being the material of her own
cell-self. From single she becomes
double and from double single.

As a woman ingests the demon sperm and with the same membrane
regurgitates the mitotic double of herself upon the

slide of time so the DNA
MOLECULE produces with a little
pop at the waistline of its viscous drop
a new microsphere the same size
as herself which proceeds singly to grow
in order to divide and double itself.
So from single to double and double to single and
mounting while descending she
expands while contracts she proliferates while
disappearing at both of her ends.

Remember that red can only be opposite green
and blue opposite yellow. Remember that the
complementary pairs of matches must differ slightly in
length "for nature's pairs can be made only with units
whose structures permit an interplay of forces
between the partners."

I fixed a blue match opposite a red
match of the same length
in defiance of the rules pointed them
away from the center on the double-stranded
tape. I saw laid a number of eggs

on eggs on the sticky side of a twig.
I saw a worm with many feet grow out
of an egg.

The worm climbed the twig a single helix and gobbled
the magnified edge of a leaf
in quick enormous bites.

It then secreted out of itself a gray floss
with which it wrapped itself tail first and so on
until it had completely muffled
and encased itself head last as in a mummy pouch.

I saw plushy irridescent wings push
moistly out of the pouch. At first glued
together they began to part. On each wing
I saw a large blue eye
open forever in the expression of resurrection.
The new Nude released the flanges
of her wings
stretching herself to touch
at all points
the outermost rim
of the noösphere.

I saw that for her body from which the
wings expanded
she had retained
the worm.

(*Icongraphs* 23–24)

Double Helix, which was published in 1968, brief quotations from which are collaged into the poem. But the poem visually and linguistically associates its contemplation of genetics with the classic Cubist painting of the great Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*.[20] The version in *Iconographs* typographically mimes the multiperspectival, Cubist fracturing of the woman (in the poem, into stanzaic shards placed at acute angles to each other).

The text supplements the original painting by making a conceptual (but not interpretive) association of The Nude's figural representation with the spiral shape of DNA's double helix. "The DNA Molecule / is The Nude Descending a Staircase," the poem announces in its opening, a grammatical structure of likeness and definition that does not constitute an actual relation of similarity, but adroitly mixes and confuses categories of aesthetic and physiological structures.

Unless we think sculpturally, spatially. Then we can see, the poem insouciantly continues, that The Nude "is the staircase," for though she is called by what she lacks (clothes, in this instance), she is identified by her movement through space (she is simultaneously descending and ascending a staircase). "The Nude / named DNA can be constructed," however, since *woman* as object of the male gaze is a construction in Western aesthetic history. But only if you "Make your model as high as the Empire / State Building" will you have "an acceptable / replica of The Nude." Acceptable to whom? we might ask, and on what grounds? With such spiraling twists of perspectives, the poem circles around issues of aesthetic and physiological materialism, the status of The Nude as reproductive and as *a* reproduction: "The Nude has 'the capacity for / replication and transcription.'" She is, as these lines make brilliantly clear, a figure of gynetic, generative writing as well as genetic coding, where she has transcriptively generated "the material of her own / cell-self" (*I* 23). Put in the context of poststructuralist feminism, this revisionary figure of *woman* is the "Newly Born Woman" (Cixous and Clément).

Thus dividing, she doubles, paradoxically both present and absent (like the self "upon // the slide of time") in a way that art anticipatorily imagines and quantum physics explains: "mounting while descending she / expands while contracts she proliferates while / disappearing" (*I* 24). Becoming herself in the course of evolution thus entails transforming quite literally in the course of the poetic text not only into an-other genetic

20. Swenson had a long history of interest and involvement in the visual arts, and as Knudson and Bigelow tell us, she even played chess with Duchamp at MacDowell in the 1950s (MS 42–45, 62).

species, but also into another genre. Abruptly, the text returns (or spirals away from, involutes) to an earlier moment in which the poem seemed at turns like a "how-to manual" (giving directions for building a DNA model), moments interrupted by the modernist collage and bricolage of quotation. Toward the end of the poem, the text returns to the notion of building a model, but this time shifts into a personal narrative, the *you* building the model becoming an observer watching "a worm" wrap itself up in a "mummy pouch." The poetic subject is introduced (in order to testify to the metamorphic process?) at the same time as the new species emerges from the chrysalis into the poem. The "new Nude" that has emerged seems capable of being not only object but subject, not only body but mind, for she bears on each wing "a large blue eye / open forever in the expression of resurrection," and she stretches "herself to touch // at all points / the outermost rim / of the noösphere. "The new Nude is not reconstructed (replicated) but resurrected (both genetically and generically), for the speaker sees "that for her body from which the / wings expanded / she had retained / the worm" (*I* 24). She is, we might say, not *newly born* but *reborn*. Although Swenson is careful to keep the visual focus in the poem on the observable texture of the world without offering much comment or interpretation, this "worm" bears all the signs of symbolizing the *self* or *soul* of Western metaphysical and spiritual traditions. Swenson tells us in her afterword that in addition to attempting to orchestrate differing, temporal modes of apprehension (the "instant object-to-eye encounter" that would precede reading "word-after-word"), *Iconographs* was influenced in part by the "sacred mathematics" of medieval religious iconography. Its exploratory investigations of visual poetics were conducted "in order to make the mind re-member . . . the Grain—the buried grain of language on which depends the transfer and expansion of consciousness" (*I* 86, 87).

The expansion that Swenson had in mind was a kind of Teilhardian vision of hope for earth through the evolution of thinking, a notion I want to suggest by following two Teilhardian words that I've quoted above because they occur in "The DNA Molecule" and in the afterword—"noösphere" and "Grain." Swenson would have been reading Pierre Teilhard de Chardin around the same time as she was reading about the discovery of DNA's double helix, for his works were published posthumously and translated into English editions throughout the 1960s. Teilhard, who was a Jesuit paleontologist, termed his notion of cerebral evolution *noögenesis* (a neologism based on the Greek word for mind, *noos*), to contrast it with *biogenesis* (the evolution of organisms of increasing complexity and adaptability on earth). He theorized that the earth was "not only

becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope, a single unanimous reflection."[21] Teilhard called the new cerebralism he optimistically envisioned, which is a capacity for reflection and self-knowledge, the *noösphere*. Swenson's version is characteristically witty and more corporeally cognizant: Teilhard's "thinking envelope" becomes "a mummy pouch" in the poem. The "grains of thought" have become, equally characteristically, poetically active: "the Grain—the buried grain of language" is the iconographic poem that makes "the mind re-member."

Teilhard developed his ideas following his horrific experience as a stretcher-bearer in WWI, and as I've proposed earlier, Swenson, who was contemplating in some of the poems of *Iconographs* the psychology of violence in a violent decade, may have found his thinking resonant. That trace words from his thought occur in *Iconographs* suggests that Swenson may have had healing "visions" in mind as she conceptualized the collection. Teilhard argued that for humans to transcend our baser nature and end war, we were going to have to evolve cerebrally. We were going to have to develop "the power acquired by a consciousness to turn it upon itself, to take possession of itself as of an object endowed with its own particular consistence and value: no longer merely to know, but to know oneself; no longer merely to know but to know that one knows" (Cunningham 165). Teilhard called the time in which humans would evolve to such a state the "Omega Point," both the final stage of evolution and a time in which barriers preventing unity and peace on earth might be surmounted. He stated that although space and time seem separate, they are "necessarily of a convergent nature"— "space-time," in other words—"Because [space-time] contains and engenders consciousness, . . . [and] must somewhere in the future become involuted to a point which we might call omega, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself" (Cunningham 259). Something approximating this process is what produces The New Nude in Swenson's poem.

That is, the involution that Teilhard describes is analogous to the movements The Nude named DNA performs as she descends the spiral staircase of genetic coding, secreting around herself the mummy pouch and then emerging as The New Nude of the Omega Point. Having fused space with time while in the cocoon, she is able *after coming out* to touch "the outermost rim / of the noösphere" when she spread her wings (the

21. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*; qtd. in Rev. Phillip J. Cunningham, "Teilhard de Chardin and the Noösphere." All of what I paraphrase and quote from Teilhard is from Cunningham's article.

double-taking connotations of which I want to note via italics). Are we to take this vision seriously? Hasn't Swenson's writing seemed too full of hijinx earlier in the poem for us to take her as seriously visionary here at the end? Swenson's playful wit functions like the Dadaist *blagues* of which she allusively reminds us, and like the Dadaists (whose movement arose like Teilhard's ideas after experiencing the horrors of WWI), her jokes have serious import. Her poetry is trying to remold thought and change minds, I want to suggest in closing, to make things happen—visibly—with words: to transfer and expand consciousness, and in turn, to turn the buried grains of language, we might say, into pearls of wisdom.

May Swenson and Other Animals

Her Poetics of Natural Selection

Paul Crumbley

The title of this essay reflects May Swenson's sense of herself as an animal and the fact that she often wrote of other animals as fellow members of an ever-evolving natural world. In an interview with Karla Hammond, Swenson observed that "Animals aren't human beings, but human beings are animals," stating further that "People should not lose their animal nature."[1] The reference to natural selection is a response to Swenson's hard-minded view of life and poetry; she was a pragmatist who sought to be part of what worked, whether through her art or through her personal relationships with the human and non-human world. She took great delight in breaking down conceptual barriers of all sorts in an effort to unite disparate sectors of her own psyche as well as to expand the scope of her interaction with the universe around her. Through the representative sampling of her poetry that follows, Swenson communicates her loving embrace of the animal in herself, her perception of human characteristics even in vegetative matter, and her artistic appropriation of the most fundamental stuff of life, the DNA molecule.

Rozanne Knudson, Swenson's partner for the last twenty-three years of her life and the executor of her literary estate, stated that Swenson's poem "The Centaur"[2] "reveals her belief that she was part animal

1. From page 121 of *Made with Words*, a collection of interviews with and works by Swenson. Hereafter *MWW*.
2. "The Centaur" appears in *May Swenson's New & Selected Things Taking Place* (hereafter, *TTP*), 237.

herself."[3] Swenson herself confirmed this belief in an interview with Cornelia Draves and Mary Jane Fortunato, in which she discussed "The Centaur," observing both that she does "have a lot of animal poems" and that she "always felt [her]self to be an animal" (*MWW* 114). This widely anthologized Swenson poem provides a good way to begin thinking about the poet's life, as it presents an older speaker reflecting on her experience as a ten-year-old girl playing by herself in the field behind her house, then returning to the house where her mother urges her to behave in a more conventionally feminine fashion. If we accept that the speaker is Swenson, or someone very much like her, the poem can be read as the poet's commentary on her childhood. Swenson encouraged this association of speaker with poet when she noted in the Draves and Fortunato interview that the poem "is a childhood memory" and the "girl in this poem . . . is myself" (*MWW* 113). The setting is indeed the field behind the family home that extended to an irrigation canal, a frequent resort for all the Swenson children.

Swenson's use of this setting suggests a degree of autobiographical intent that is further supported by three distinct features of the poem, each of which provides insight into Swenson's early life. The first is the girl's use of a male tool, the "brother's jack-knife" (line 10), that for the older poet becomes the female appropriation of male power, both symbolic and sexual, that clearly bears on the female writer's use of the phallic pen. The second is the girl's identification with the horse, so that she becomes both female rider and male horse: "I was the horse and the rider, / and the leather I slapped to his rump // spanked my own behind" (38–40). This language reveals the young poet's immersion in imaginative experience while also foreshadowing the fusion of self and other, as well as the gender play that so delighted the mature poet. The third is the girl's encounter with her mother, who identifies and corrects the girl's departure from conventional gender norms:

> *What's that in your pocket?* she said.
> *Just my knife*. It weighted down my pocket
> and stretched my dress awry.
>
> *Go tie back your hair*, said my mother,
> and *why is your mouth all green?*
> *Rob Roy, he pulled some clover*
> *as we crossed the field*, I told her.
> (58–64).

3. R. R. Knudson, *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson* (hereafter *Pen*), 106, 22.

Here we see the insistent mother affirming the importance of conventional gender roles without condemning the imaginative play that provoked the young girl's transgression, implying that imaginative play is fine as long as convention is respected. From the perspective of the older poet, what perhaps stands out most in these concluding lines is the solid rhyme that forms the only end rhyme in the only couplet in the poem's only four-line stanza. This special emphasis on the words "I told her" points to the older poet's fascination with the openness of this communication. In words that convey both uninhibited disclosure and mutual respect, the speaker marvels that at that early age she did in fact tell her mother and, in doing so, literally had the last word on the matter of imagination and gender identity.

Swenson's childhood really was characterized by a rich and abundant imaginative experience that included exposure to nature, free and independent self-expression, and reverence for the social codes that framed life in Mormon-dominated Logan, Utah. As Mormon converts and immigrants from Sweden, May's parents enforced respect for the values of their adopted culture. At the same time, though, as the oldest of ten children, May was granted a measure of adult autonomy early in life. She was the only child with a room of her own (*Pen* 34); her father made her a writing desk,[4] and when she turned twelve he made her twelve little books with blank pages that would become her first diaries. May's parents and her siblings recognized and supported May's life as a writer from its earliest emergence until her death.

Swenson's interest in writing surfaced early, and quickly became a major force in her life. Her first publication came in 1929, when her short story "Christmas Day" won the Vernon Short Story Medal and appeared in *The Grizzly*, Logan High School's student newspaper. Her first poetry publication appeared when she was student at Utah State University, then known as Utah Agricultural College. Her poem "Three Hues of Melody" was published in the campus literary magazine, *The Scribble*. After graduating from college in 1934, Swenson worked as a journalist in Salt Lake City for a little over a year before moving to New York in 1936, where she sought to make a life for herself as a writer. While traveling east, she wrote a letter to one of her literary heroes, Thomas Wolfe, in which she stated, "Oh Thomas Wolfe, I shall come to your city—my CITY. I am coming into the thick of it. I crouch like a panther. A snarl meaning

4. Reference regarding her father's desk is from R. R. Knudson and Suzzanne Bigelow, eds., *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos* (hereafter, *MS)*, 27.

sweetness and rage rises in me" (*Pen* 41). Here Swenson provided another of her many characteristic associations of herself with an animal. In this instance, the association is directly linked to her sense of being and becoming a writer. She asserted that she was willing to enter the New York literary jungle and that she would fight if she must.

Swenson's first thirteen years in New York were not easy and she was compelled to scrap her way to literary fame. Her breakthrough came after years of rejections and financial hardship, when *The Saturday Review of Literature* published her poem "Haymaking" on August 20, 1949 (*Pen* 66). Shortly thereafter, Swenson became friends with Elizabeth Bishop, worked for James Laughlin of New Directions, and met Howard Moss of the *New Yorker* (*MS* 57–60). Swenson would go on to publish fifty-nine poems in the *New Yorker* (*MS* 58). Her first book, *Another Animal*, came out in 1954. It would be the first of eleven books of poetry and one of four volumes with titles expressing her abiding interest in the evolutionary process, the fusion of human and animal experience, and the way language itself participates in creation. The other three titles are *A Cage of Spines* (1958), *To Mix With Time* (1963), and *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (1978). On the strength of these works and the prominence she achieved within the world of American letters, Swenson served as chancellor for the Academy of American Poets from 1980 until her death in 1989 and won many awards, including a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1987, which she won in the same year she was given an honorary doctorate in letters by her alma mater, Utah State University (*MS* 115–21).

Swenson's deep engagement in evolution and what might productively be thought of as her poetics of natural selection is vividly expressed in a May 29, 1951, letter she wrote to her father. This letter was written at a pivotal moment in Swenson's life as a writer—shortly after her successful emergence from thirteen years of financial hardship and artistic struggle. Swenson had by this time seen her first poems published in prestigious national poetry venues, but she hadn't yet placed any poems in *The New Yorker* or published her first book. As the letter indicates, though, she was confident that the talent she had privately nurtured in the face of seemingly endless rejections was at last being recognized. This letter gives a glimpse of Swenson, now age thirty-eight, confidently describing her artistic self-understanding at the very point in her career when she has made the transition from self-doubt and frustration to self-assurance and artistic success. The language of the letter crystallizes the sense of artistic purpose that runs through all of her work but that she rarely expresses with the clarity she provides here when explaining herself to her father.

Her respect for both her father and her mother are evident in every word, as is her awareness that her parents are devout Mormons, who view Utah as the "promised land" and subscribe to a conservative social system firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology:

> I often wonder and have doubts about whether what I write has any significance for you. I don't imagine it does—for your life is so full and active that you have no need for the playthings of art. Your creative urge is spent directly in living—in shaping people through your influence, in cultivating growing things—not in trying to capture sensations through the medium of art. The word "art" is contained in the word "artificial," the opposite of natural. Well, it is that—it is a sort of opposite of life—a sort of rebellion against life perhaps, or an attempt to control or equal it with a synthetic creation of one's own, rather than riding with life, giving in to it, immersing oneself in it, and resigning oneself to being but a particle in a process. . . .
>
> Dad, I expect you sometimes wonder about me and perhaps feel pain at the fact that I seem "outside the fold"—not only in that I have spent so many years at a distance from home, but that my beliefs and attitudes seem different from most of the rest of the family. I want to point to the fact that this seeming separation, or opposition, is actually not the case—that, in fact, it proves my likeness to you and mother and my comparison with you (at least psychologically)—for just as you and mother were not content with inherited knowledge and belief, with the traditional way of life of your parents and ancestors and felt the need to find a new faith and even a new land for yourselves, I had this same impulse. It is a healthy impulse—it is really the evolutionary impulse itself at its root, which accounts for all progress (for decay as well, perhaps)—let us say, for *change*, which is the dynamics of life. I do not know whether I am making a big circle with my life (I hope it is not a zero!) simply in order to arrive, in the end, where I started—but even if this turns out to be the case the journey would not be entirely foolish because every sensitive human being is confronted with the necessity of learning by himself, of discovering through experience, and is simply incapable of taking his course in life for granted as pointed out by parents or others in authority. . . .
> (Letter to Daniel Arthur Swenson 1–2)

One of the most impressive features of this letter is Swenson's emphatic desire to solidify family ties by representing herself as the newest embodiment of the family spirit, a spirit that she links not only to the human spirit, but to the continuously unfolding spirit of creation itself, which she would identify later in her life as the evolutionary advance of mind Pierre Teilhard de Chardin referred to as the "noösphere." (*Human Phenomenon* 247 n. 9).

Crucial to Swenson's self-representation in this letter is the way she explains her difference from her family in terms of evolution. Her artistic creation, she argues, stands in opposition to her father's chosen form of creativity; she "stands outside the fold" while he stands within; her beliefs and attitudes appear not merely different but entirely separate from those of her family. Her writing, however, declares that this undeniable opposition is apparent only and not enduring, certainly not ontological, when viewed within the broad historical context of her role as the genetic and spiritual offspring of her parents. This logic would also apply retroactively to her earlier statement about the artificiality of art that she bases on the opposition of art to life, an opposition that she qualifies by conflating "life" with what is "natural" and claiming that the artist rebels against life by refusing to "ride *with* life." Swenson's point in both instances is that opposition is never static but always part of a dynamic growth process—what she refers to in the context of art as the artist's "synthetic creation." When writing about her seeming opposition to her parents' way of life, she affirms that her conduct is not finally oppositional at all, but rather a product of the "evolutionary impulse" she shares with them.

Swenson's words tell us that the difference between opposition and shared purpose comes down to point of view and proximity to the experience described: when seen close up, opposition seems intractable, unbridgeable; but with distance the chasm of opposition closes and opposing actions look like alternative routes to the same goal. This is in large part because what Swenson chooses to view as significant is what works, what may be thought of as those few among our many actions that take us in productive directions. From the vantage of who we are now, we can see the path from who we were to our present selves as a sequence of productive impulses—especially if we have just felt the first hints of artistic recognition. All the miscues and unproductive choices pale because they have no place in the causal chain that leads to us as we are now. The artist's rebellious oppositions to the supposedly natural course of life cease to be oppositional when they work, when the marginal is absorbed by the mainstream and the current of life is fractionally altered. With the benefit

of distance and the confidence born of recent success, Swenson can state that her relocation east from Utah is the same as her parents' relocation west from Sweden.

For Swenson, language was the crucible through which difference could emerge as shared purpose. As a poet, she discovered in language the full range of her experience: her participation in the natural world, her fascination with science, her many loves—romantic and familial—her enthusiasm for sport, her delight in puzzles, her obsession with philosophical questions, her engagement with the political issues of her moment. Through a process closely resembling natural selection, Swenson pragmatically built on the past by diligently searching for what works in language. In her essay "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age," Swenson described the "the poetic experience" as "one of constant curiosity, skepticism, and testing—astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things. . ." (148). This interplay of astonishment and disillusionment, discovery and skepticism that accompany the poet's compulsive testing of language to discover newer and richer expressions of meaning, strikingly parallels the process of natural selection Charles Darwin describes in terms of species adaptation in *The Origin of Species*: "As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in a manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying condition of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be *naturally selected*" (47).

Swenson speaks directly to the question of selection and her wish to position herself at the peak point of the struggle for existence in her essay "The Poet as Antispecialist." There she describes poetry as "based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they *appear* to things as they *are* and then into a larger, wilder space as they *are becoming*" (91). In these words about poetry, Swenson echoes the language she used in her letter to her father where she pointed out that apparent differences in life style were bridged by the experience of becoming that she referred to as their shared "evolutionary impulse."

Many people intimate with Swenson and her work have commented on the correspondence her work has with the process of creation. Mona Van Duyn describes Swenson's poetry as "an art that comes as close as any I know to what I like to think must have been the serious fun, the gorgeous mix of play and purpose of Creation itself" (154). John Hollander

observes that Swenson's unrelenting "preoccupation with finding emblems in natural fact" differs from either the "Darwinian or Lamarckian causal story" by virtue of her moral purpose (294–95). And this moral presence is worth noting, as it points to Swenson's investment of herself in the selection process, a self that carries with it all the value laden desires any culturally situated subject would be expected to have. At her funeral in 1989, May's brother Roy recalled May's having uttered aphoristic observations about life that now serve double duty as both philosophy of life and artistic credo. "Life is a mystery," she told Roy. "We must not give ourselves airs. We are not the apex of creation. It is all evolving. We don't know what the answers will be" (*MS* 124). May reiterates this fundamental sense of humility in "A Note about *Iconographs*": "It has always been my tendency to let each poem 'make itself'—to develop, in process of becoming, its own individual physique" (86). Even though she may have been seeking answers from her unique point of view and proceeding with a moral purpose, Swenson's aim was never to proclaim the answers; hers was a life dedicated to the forward wave of creation, to delight in the mystery of selection, to let go of the unselected, to ride the current of the new.

Once we see that Swenson was dedicated to the emergence of new life through language, we can understand why she titled her first book *Another Animal*, her second *A Cage of Spines*, her third *To Mix With Time*, and her tenth *New & Selected Things Taking Place*. Language was for Swenson inseparable from any understanding of creation or humanity's role in it. She said this quite plainly in a journal entry from May 1965. "My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its *expression* through thought & word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. . . . Human recognition and expression concomitantly created the past, the history of existence, with the present, and it projects the future" (qtd. in Zona 127). Swenson's version of the structuralist's insight that experience is indistinguishable from language helps explain why she sees poetry as the proper vehicle for participation in the unfinished business of evolution.

Of Swenson's many poems that celebrate the ongoing process of creation, none does so with more grace and humor than "Deciding," a poem she wrote in 1954, three years after she wrote the letter to her father identifying her own "evolutionary impulse." This poem makes playful of use of a prominent regional symbol, the potato so commonly associated with Idaho, as a means of parodying the limiting force of culturally constructed norms that treat identity as a preexisting language inscribed on the body. Swenson effectively loosens the restrictive force of the "natural" by means

of laughter, utilizing what Judith Butler identifies as "a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects" (146). By revealing the contingency of bedrock cultural assumptions, Swenson seeks to create a linguistic space for the emergence of a new sort of selfhood. Her poem cracks the seemingly seamless surface of cultural logic, enabling the imagination to contemplate new forms of human expression.

Deciding

Deciding to go on digging doing it
what they said outside wasn't any use
Inside hiding it made it get ambitious
Like a potato in a dark bin
it grew white grabbers for light
out of its navel eyes not priding
itself much just deciding
it wasn't true inside what they said
outside those bumps were

All humped alike dumped inside
slumped in burlap said
roots are no good out of ground
a fruit's crazy to want to be a flower
Besides it's sin changing the given shape
Bursting the old brown skin is suicide
Wishing to taste like a tulip
sip colored light
outside thumps said it wasn't right

Deciding to keep on striding
from inside bursting the bin-side
poking out wishes for delicious opposites
turning blind eyes to strong fingers
touching meaning more than sight
the navel scars of weaning
used for something finally
Deciding to go on digging doing it
(*Nature* 36)

Here is the uprooted potato framed in the furious play of opposition and fusion that most characterizes Swenson's best work. As readers, we are

simultaneously inside and outside the potato bin, worrying about what is said, assuming the posture of the speaker and the listener, knowing and refusing the high stakes of sin, ambitiously following the trajectory of change, contemplating a decision but like Prufrock, not deciding so much as thinking about deciding and all the while digging the action, like a beat poet rooted in time but not deciding, using the lingo but not wholly subscribing to the culture, thinking about blooming like a tulip, transmuting through the heterosexual matrix of round fruit, navel, eyes and flower, mutating to "white grabbers," bursting skin, bold striding, and "strong fingers"—all part of a continuous deciding, a coming out, a sexual dance, a decision endlessly strung out in time, just like creation.

These are all features of the classic Swenson scene of action: self as experiment expressed fully in the ongoing action of language, distrusting the static, restless and complete while in fluid movement, all decisions contemplated—none achieved. That the scene should be sensual, erotic, and deeply intellectual is absolutely characteristic. In one of her first poems, "The Maiden in the Grass," an unpublished poem that Alicia Ostriker elsewhere in this book describes as demonstrating that Whitman's earthiness found a home in Swenson, the speaker beckons the world seductively:

> I kiss thee, little hot Grass..
> I creep up against thee, yearning stone..
> Have me, wind..
> I turn, I part my garment.[5]

Composed in 1936 when she was twenty-three and still in Utah, the poem effectively captures the impetuous daring that would lead Swenson to New York while also acknowledging the sensual appetite that has led Ostriker to refer to Swenson in the title of her essay in this book as "Whitman's Daughter."

In "The Truth Is Forced," a poem from much later in Swenson's life (1961), Swenson displays the same sensual immersion, only this time she explains how the poet's ability to enter "the skins / of every creature" forms part of her poetic manifesto:

> One must be honest somewhere. I wish
> to be honest in poetry.
> With the written word.

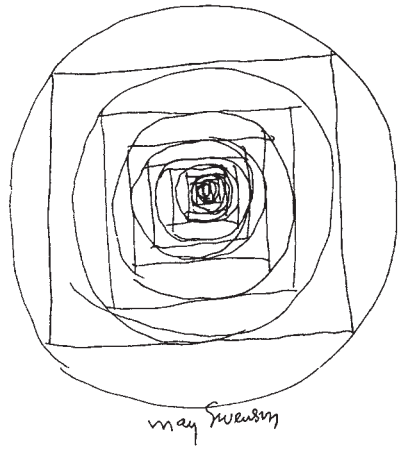
5. Published here by permission of the Swenson Estate.

Where I can say and cross out
and say over and around
and say on top of and say in between
and say in symbol, in riddle,
in double meaning, under masks
of any feature, in the skins
of every creature.
And in my own skin, naked.
I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
to become naked in poetry,
to force the truth
through a poem,
which, when it is made, if real,
not a dummy, tells me
and then you (all or any, eye to eye)
my whole self,
the truth.
(*Nature* 11–12)

Mark Doty's observation that Swenson was a masterful manipulator of the "veils and swathings of language" clearly applies to this poem (92). As he puts it, "Eros often lies in what is withheld, at least for a while. . . Just so, the naked body of the poem may be made infinitely more alluring by the right negligee, the elegant strategies of concealment and promise." After all, Doty asks, "What is less sexy than a nudist camp?"

This aspect of Swenson, her reticent display, aligns her less with Whitman, perhaps, than with Emily Dickinson, whose "sumptuous Destitution" (Poem 1404 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) more closely resembles Swenson's erotics of concealment than the "Magnifying and applying" of Whitman's "Song of Myself" ("Song" l.1026 *Leaves of Grass*). Like Dickinson, Swenson does "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –" (Poem 1263 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) though she may most resemble Dickinson in her devotion to the interrelationship of win and loss, harmony and opposition. When Dickinson writes, "We lose – because we win – / Gamblers – recollecting which – / Toss their dice again!" (Poem 28 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) she sets the stage for Swenson's ceaseless gambling with language. Each of her poetic strip teases is also a tossing of the evolutionary dice where she repeatedly risks discovering a dummy in her search for the real. She hints at this in her letter to her father when she acknowledges that "every sensitive human being is confronted with the necessity

of learning by himself, of discovering through experience." Her poetics of natural selection demands that losing be seen as winning, and that life be lived most fully in the nude, when exposure is greatest, something that happens through her verbal dance of veils. This is the way Swenson forces truth. Not by main force, but in the greenhouse of language where the sun of human intelligence draws forth the flower, forcing the latent life of the imagination to compete for cultural space.



As Swenson's self-portrait makes clear, there was nothing static in Swenson's self-image. Through a simple arrangement of boxes and circles, she depicts a personality expanding outward. Were we able to tilt the portrait on its horizontal axis rather than staring into it as into a well, with a reflection infinitely receding in ever smaller telescoping repetition, we would more clearly see that the image also projects progress forward as through time. This is not a smooth advance, however; it is composed of gaps, wherein expansion suddenly transpires, as if the movement from one moment to another escapes visual delineation, just as natural selection, the engine of evolution, leaps forward. Life continuously expands through the process of survival, but the crucible of change is chaotic; each new stage is a sudden materialization that clearly builds on what came before, but does so mysteriously. In this way, Swenson's self-portrait incorporates key visual features that abstractly represent evolutionary process, thus reiterating Swenson's view of her own life as a sequence of oppositions graced by periodic breakthroughs that replace difference with the realization of shared purpose.

Swenson's poem "The DNA Molecule" may be her most ambitious

attempt to place poetry in direct communication with living matter. As in "The Truth Is Forced," nakedness plays an important role in this poem also, only in this instance nakedness is specifically addressed through the speaker's reference to Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Of course, DNA is also a form of nakedness, as it is the bare minimum of matter that codes what covers it. Here we also have Swenson clearly writing in a manner that draws on Duchamp (though changing the gender of the nude) to establish at the outset the poem's concern with the way artistic creation enters conversation with biological reproduction. Swenson, who thought of her poems as her children (*Pen* 80), here presents us with a speaker who gives new form to the molecule that is in fact the genetic foundation of all life. The visual shape Swenson gave the poem in *Iconographs*—her type arrangement that mimics the double helix—is the first aspect of that version of the poem that we perceive, proclaiming Swenson's aim of creating the act of creation. The reading that proceeds from this point unfolds through carefully modulated shifts in perspective framed by the double-helix image, pushing the reading experience toward maximum fluidity, blurring the lines between scientific fact, artistic rendering, and the act of conceiving creation within the imagination. By this means the reader is situated alongside the scientist, whose words appear in quotation marks, the speaker and Swenson herself as we collectively commune with the molecule.

The poem's sequential organization clarifies its concern with the act of creation. In the first four of the poem's six sections—represented below in the more conventional stanza arrangement Swenson devised for the version of the poem published in *New & Selected Things Taking Place*—the speaker describes the molecule, instructing us at times with directives that are supplemented with scientific quotations.

> The DNA Molecule
>
> The DNA Molecule is The Nude Descending a Staircase,
> a circular one. See the undersurfaces of the spiral
> treads and the spaces in between. She is descending
> and, at the same time, ascending, and she moves
> around herself. For she is the staircase, "a proto-
> plasmic framework that twists and turns." She is a
> double helix, mounting and dismounting around the
> swivel of her imaginary spine.

The Nude named DNA can be constructed as a model with matches and a ribbon of tape. Be sure to use only four colors on two white strands of twistable tape. "Only matches of complementary colors may be placed opposite each other. The pairs are to be Red and Green, and Yellow and Blue." Make your model as high as the Empire State Building, and you have an acceptable replica of The Nude. But (and this is harder) you must make her move in a continuous coil, an alpha helix, a double spiral downward and upward at once, and you must make her increase while, at the same time, occupying the same field. She must be made to maintain "a basic topography," changing, yet remaining stable, if she is to perform her function, which is to produce and reproduce the microsphere.

Such a sphere is invisible to, but omnipresent in, the naked eye of The Nude. It contains a "central region and an outer membrane," making it both able to divide and to make exact copies of itself without limit. The Nude "has the capacity for replication and transcription" of all genesis. She ingests and regurgitates the genetic material, it being the material of her own cell-self. From single she becomes double, and from double single. As a woman ingests the demon sperms and, with the same membrane, regurgitates the mitotic double of herself upon the slide of time, so The DNA Molecule produces, with a little pop, at the waistline of its viscous drop, a new microsphere the same size as herself, which proceeds singly to grow in order to divide and double itself. So, from single to double and double to single, and mounting while descending, she expands while contracts, she proliferates while disappearing, at both of her ends.

Remember that Red can only be opposite Green, and Blue opposite Yellow. Remember that the complimentary pairs of matches must differ slightly in length, "for nature's pairs can be made only with units whose structures permit an interplay of forces between partners."

> I fixed a Blue match opposite a Red match of the same
> length, pointed away from the center on the double strand
> of tape. I saw laid a number of eggs on eggs on the
> sticky side of a twig. I saw a worm with many feet
> grow out of an egg. The worm climbed the twig, a single
> helix, and gobbled the magnified edge of a leaf in quick
> enormous bites. It then secreted out of itself a gray
> floss with which it wrapped itself, tail first, and
> so on, until it had completely muffled and encased
> itself, head too, as in a mummy sack.
>
> I saw plushy, iridescent wings push moistly out of the
> pouch. At first glued together, they began to part.
> On each wing I saw a large blue eye, open forever
> in the expression of resurrection. The new Nude
> released the flanges of her wings, stretching herself
> to touch at all points the outermost rim of the
> noösphere. I saw that, for her body, from which the
> wings expanded, she had retained the worm.
>
> (*TTP* 92–93)

Stanzas one and three are primarily descriptive, while stanzas two and four are largely instructive. Stanza one introduces the double helix as seen from the outside and stanza three examines it from the inside. Stanzas two and four deal with the parts of the molecule and how they must be assembled; these stanzas function as instructions for physical construction. Once the object of study has been comprehended according to available artistic and scientific precedent, the speaker launches her own creation, in stanzas five and six, seeking to generate new life beyond the cutting edge of art and science. The poem tells us that this last step is always solitary, predicated on what is known but gambling on an isolated innovation that may or may not survive the crucible of natural selection. The word "resurrection" in the final stanza is significant as it signals the transformation of life achieved through trial. In this instance, the speaker's gamble with the rules pays off and the trial is survived: a "new Nude" (line 60) unfolds, and we are told that she is a perfect fit: "her wings . . . touch at all points the outmost rim of the / noösphere" (61–63). Crucially, this new creature is both the DNA nude we have seen before and something totally new. As the last line of the poem states, "she had retained the worm" (64). This addition marks an expansion of the sphere of life that returns us to

the point that opened the poem: with the speaker observing Duchamp's *Nude*. The speaker's violation of the pattern, like Swenson's own departure from Utah and the lifestyle of her parents, created the new pattern, the deviant countercurrent that successfully expands the mainstream.

As was the case in her 1951 letter to her father, Swenson carefully manages perspective in the final sections of the poem to illuminate the way a marked departure from the normative pattern precedes the emergence of new life. This is accomplished at the beginning of the fifth stanza where the now isolated speaker takes the only direct action in the poem: she violates the rules by "fix[ing] a blue match opposite a red / match of the same length" (47–48). This departure from the poem's own norms is reinforced by other changes in the poem that set these final lines apart as distinctly different from the poem up to this point: the speaker separates from the reader and the scientist, the language tense shifts from present and future to past tense, and the poem magnifies the field of vision. Instead of describing a nude the size of the Empire State Building, the poem now directs our attention to "eggs on the / sticky side of a twig" that become a worm that forms "a single / helix" (49–50) then gobbles "the magnified edge of a leaf" and disappears into "a mummy sack" (52, 56). This is the moment of greatest tension, when only half a helix has materialized, signaling that progress toward new life is underway but not yet complete. Significantly, we cannot see what happens at this point; all we can do is passively watch through the speaker's eyes as she recalls what she saw emerge from the crucible of selection.

The final stanza continues the speaker's narration in the past tense, so that we hear what amounts to a report on the isolated act of creation that successfully translates difference into unity. The most distinctive feature of the final stanza is its dramatic telescoping of the visual field that occurs as the "new Nude" rises out of the chrysalis, opens her wings, and expands the sphere of life. Initially her wings unfurl to show "a large blue eye" on each that is "open forever / in the expression of resurrection" (59–60). The eye on each wing designates both the butterfly's evolutionary defense mechanism and the linguistic pun on the distinct "I" that is this new creation, a self distinct from any other. The biological fact of the butterfly compounds with the insect's traditional symbolic links to rebirth, psyche, and artistic expression to reassert the interrelationship of science, art, and individual that has operated throughout the poem. Once this "new Nude" is introduced, though, the wings become important not because of their novelty, but through the perfect completion of their evolutionary role. The poem immediately directs our attention to

the nude's precise fit, her "stretching herself / to touch at all points the outermost rim of the / noösphere" (61–63), which is to say that she survives because she fits the sphere of life. She lives because she works. The final lines assert that her importance is not due to her novelty but rather to her function in filling the evolutionary niche. And at this point the allusion to Teilhard de Chardin's "noösphere" is also noteworthy, as by means of this term he designated the final stage of evolution, the stage he describes in language drawn from Julian Huxley as "*nothing less than evolution become conscious of itself*" (*Phenomenon of Man* 220). This evolutionary self-consciousness is evident in the lines that follow, when we are told that "her body" (63), the seat of all difference from what surrounds her, is not distinctive for its contribution to what she has become, but for having "retained the worm" (64), a feature of her previous state. The poem ends by asking us to look backward, placing the "new Nude" in the context of linear history, her body bearing the imprint of what she was, thus bridging the gap between difference and sameness and drawing our attention to the way life evolves when isolated experiments match the needs of natural selection.

"The DNA Molecule" can finally be understood as an optimistic poem that traces to successful completion the action that the poem "Deciding" contemplates but does not realize. There is also optimism in "Deciding," but in that poem the optimism registers in the speaker's ability to go on "digging it" even when unsure of what the outcome of her digging it will be. Swenson's poem "Teleology" spells out the difficulty of finding the passage from the present to the future that is sought in "Deciding" and achieved in "The DNA Molecule":

> Teleology
>
> The eyes look front in humans.
> Horse or dog could not shoot,
>
> seeing two sides to everything.
> Fish, who never shut their eyes,
>
> can swim on their sides, and see
> two worlds: blunt dark below;
>
> above, the daggering light.
> Round as a burr, the eye

its whole head, the housefly
sees in a whizzing circle.

Human double-barreled eyes,
in their narrow blind trained

forward, hope to shoot and hit
—if they can find it—

the backward-speeding hole
in the Cyclops face of the future.
(*TTP* 77)

Swenson's optimism here rests in her confidence that there will be a passage to the future and that we will get there if we just keep digging what we are doing. What Swenson always bears in mind is that as difficult as it may be to pierce the "backward-speeding hole / in the Cyclops face" (lines 15–16), doing so is what brought us to the present, and it is what we are designed to do. Our "Human double-barreled eyes" are genetic evidence of this; our eyes, the poem tells us, are "trained // forward" and guided by "hope" (11–13).

This is the same hope that registers so forcefully in the words etched into the granite bench above Swenson's grave. On the pedestal of the bench, the architectural support for the seat that itself offers temporary rest—a pause, not a terminus—are words from her poem "I Look at My Hand." These words detail the genetic trace her parents imprinted in her, the foundation for the life she made so different from theirs:

I look at my hand and see
it is also his and hers;
the pads of the fingers his,

the wrists and knuckles hers.
(*Nature* 19, lines 1–4)

This is Swenson's history, the part of her that looks backward to find sameness extending through the past to her present, like the view of the worm in "the Nude" that ends "The DNA Molecule." The seat of the bench, supported by the pedestal, bears words that look into the future, searching for the Cyclops eye: "Now my body flat, / the ground breathes.

/ I'll be the grass" (*Nature* 8, lines 1–3). These lines from the poem "The Exchange" face the sky, casting their visage upward and proclaiming the poet's dedication to the crucible of endless selection even from the grave: "I will stand, / a tree here, / never to know another spot. // Wind," she intones, "be motion. / Birds, be passion. / Water, invite me to your bed" (lines 13–18). Swenson summons wind, water, and passion's fire to the earth of her grave, calling the elements to a solitary spot in touch with the world of motion. This is Swenson still deciding, still digging doing it.

How Everything Happens

Notes on May Swenson's Theory of Writing

Michael Spooner

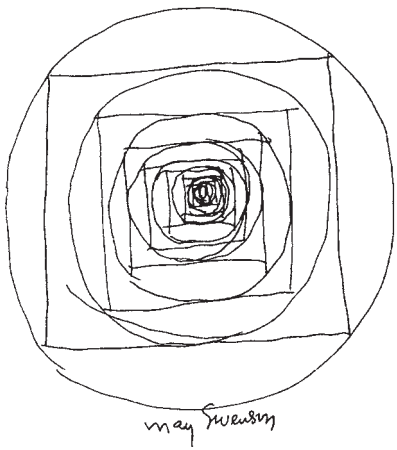
"Notes," because I don't want to construe May Swenson as a writing theorist, or even as one who cared much about writing as a field of study. As far as I know, it was never her purpose to study "the composing process" as such; her purpose was to compose. Still, any writer does invoke a theory of writing—a tacit one, an idiosyncratic one—and in fact, though it may not have been her purpose to develop a systematic theory of writing, she clearly did think deeply about her own composing process. In addition, May Swenson was inclined and was called upon, as most writers are, from time to time, to explain herself. She left traces of her explanations in certain places for us to find, and I think we can understand her work and genius a little better if we study some of the ideas about writing that she herself found useful. We can find a representative sample of these in the collection of poems she committed not to print but to LP in her 1976 Caedmon recording, *The Poetry and Voice of May Swenson*. Each poem I'll study in this chapter is included on that recorded collection, along with a brief commentary by the poet on each, just as she might have delivered it before a live audience in a Greenwich Village café. In these poems and these comments, we get a fairly clear picture of May Swenson's theory of knowledge—at least what it was in the mid-1970s—and through it, we glimpse something of her theory of writing.

Self-Portrait

Many years ago, to amuse bartenders and young women, I learned to caricature myself on cocktail napkins. It took only a stroke or two of the

pen: high forehead, beak nose, thinning hair, moustache. I didn't wear glasses then. There's something about a caricature, some vandalistic joy. And though mockery of someone else is always fun, self-mockery is a delightful double entendre—the distortion appealingly humble, the artfulness a silent boast. Toulouse-Lautrec is all the grander for exaggerating his small stature in *Moulin Rouge*.

When she was invited to contribute to a book called *Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves* (Britton), May Swenson offered the following.



"Damn," you can hear the other contributors muttering. "Wish I'd thought of that." Where others in the book "pictured" themselves—wart, eyebrow, tooth, and nose—the one thing Swenson didn't give us is a visage. She gave the circle and the square. A literally self-effacing gesture, yet in this self-effacement, she transcended the prompt "picture yourself," doodling us into a *trompe l'oeil* of the self that is at once more enigmatic and more revealing. As she did so often in her poems, Swenson employed two quite simple, deliberately childlike tropes: circle and square. "Aw shucks" they seem to say. "I'm just a cowgirl in the city. Well-rounded but still a little square." And, of course, it's the tension between them that she wanted us to see. They are not just a circle and a square; they are a circle *within* a square *within* a circle *within* a square *within* a circle, and it is the tension and repetition between these simple geometric forms that gives "Self-Portrait" its telescoping illusion.

As she reminds us in her poem "The Wonderful Pen," May Swenson is bold enough to show herself, her mind, but she doesn't need to spell everything out. "I have a wonderful mind: / Inventive. It is / for you to find. Read *me*. Read my mind" (Riverside CA, 1973).

If we read her mind, the simple, shy, self-deprecating shapes of "Self-Portrait" become an icon of infinite depth. We might say she is of two minds, even, and this is what I'll argue about her theory of writing. In so many of her poems and her commentaries, Swenson offers us an idea suspended between two poles.

Knowledge Achieved/Knowledge Received

Swenson introduces her Caedmon LP with these words: "There is knowledge achieved through mental effort and knowledge received through instinct or by way of the subconscious. Many of my poems, it has seemed to me after their birth, are attempts to record received knowledge" (*The Poetry and Voice of May Swenson*). It is difficult to capture her spoken rhythm on the page—she pauses meaningfully after "achieved" and "received," as if she intends punctuation there, where none is called for. If we line it out differently, her sense becomes clearer:

> There is knowledge achieved
> through mental effort
> and knowledge received
> through instinct
> or by way of the subconscious.

Printed this way, one hears the implicit "that is," the silent "i.e." that she delivers by vocal inflection after each of her categories of knowledge. And how categorical she is here. I love the confident modernism of her formula; how impossible such a stance has become in our fragmented postmodern time. Born in 1913, May Swenson reflects here and elsewhere the mid-twentieth-century persuasion of scientific rationalism. She believes in progress, science, reason, and form.

"Knowledge achieved by . . . effort." It should be written with a capital *E*, as her dry Utah accent also speaks to me of pioneer Effort, the backbreaking work of hopeful immigrants in an arid land. If you know the American West, you know how powerfully that motif still moves the imagination here, in spite of how we temper it nowadays with a more clear-eyed revisionist history. Every place has its ethos, and ours was built on the religion of self-reliance and the idolatry of progress. W. H. D. Koerner's *Madonna of the Prairie* is still the image that many westerners hold in their hearts. (If you don't know this one, it's a tender portrait in oils of a young pioneer wife perched on the seat of a Conestoga—yes, framed

by the round outline of the canvas wagon cover. Her soulful eye and haloed brow glowed most popularly from the cover of a Zane Grey novel.) We find effort, too, enshrined in the doctrine of "perfectibility"—the idea that one may achieve perfection in the afterlife through good works in the present one. This is among the official myths of the Latter-day Saints (and some other Christian groups). I mention these two particular valences of effort because May Swenson's parents were not only immigrants to the West but were also Mormon converts. She is the product, I am saying, of a place and a people conceived in effort.

I think we can see rationalism as basic even in the more transcendent category of "knowledge received," because although she allows it, she assigns it straightaway to animal instinct (a Darwinian gesture) or to the subconscious. And it is the *sub*conscious—Freud's term—she employs here, not the mystical *un*conscious of Jung. Though not all knowledge is achievable rationally, Swenson seems to say, the mind is after all knowable and can be rationally explained. And by stipulating the "received" as a category of knowledge—one of only two categories, in fact—she neatly achieves an idea that might in other hands be completely inaccessible to reason.

Still, as a poet, May Swenson cannot be completely intellectual; that is, she cannot ignore the long tradition of the Muse, from whom so many poets have said they receive. She resists it, though, I think. "Knowledge received through instinct" is resistance to the Romantic tradition, at least as that tradition sees itself in Coleridge and Byron, in Wordsworth and his vacant musing. There is no priesthood of the imagination for her, because instinct is natural, not supernatural—perhaps mysterious, but never mystical. One hears Rousseau, however, when she considers the green freedom of the natural world, as she does in "The Centaur" and other poems. In lines like "body my house / my horse, my hound" from "Question," she confines the mind clearly within the rambunctious body, the natural body that must someday fall. Fallible, physical, the body is the site and source of instinct; its knowledge is received upward from the earth. Swenson left religion behind when she set out for the big city. Was her leaving, in part, a rational flight from heavenly knowledge, a reversal of the received/achieved balance as practiced by a faith community deeply invested in prophetic revelation? One wonders if this could be part of why she's willing to receive only through instinct or the subconscious. Or perhaps she means "instinct" and the "subconscious" in the way that Henri Bergson means "intuition"—a nonreligious revelation, a *non*rational but not *ir*rational faculty of mind. Either way, it seems that she is re-visioning inspiration as a category of knowledge within the reach of reason.

I don't want to leave it there, however, because although Swenson was agnostic in adulthood, she never lost interest in the numinous. In fact, she wrote enough poems on religious subjects to suggest a separate collection, though one has never been compiled. Accordingly, we should not miss the religious resonance in "knowledge received." It is not only conservative religious traditions that teach a knowledge accessible by a path beyond the ken of reason. Pascal reminds us that when reason is exhausted, the reasonable thing is to open the mind to faith; Kierkegaard anticipates the postmodern when he argues that Hegelian objectivity is impossible (and fruitless). And though with "instinct" and "subconscious" Swenson does resist a Wordsworthian muse, she still harks back to the Romantic tradition, where the poem descends upon the poet, who more or less channels it: "Many of my poems, it has seemed to me after their birth, are attempts to record received knowledge." A word is *born,* knowledge is *received* and *recorded.* Bearing in mind the poet's background, it is impossible to hear this language and not to hear the *Gospel According to John* and *The Book of Mormon.* Swenson's theory of written invention here is deeply informed by the image of the writer meditating alone, with the poem settling onto the page like the Word of the Lord. There is knowledge received and there is knowledge revealed.

Seeing Through Everything

Let's briefly consider three poems that Swenson specifically identifies as "received." If you can get any recording of her reading these, it will add depth. So many poets read so badly that, except out of morbid curiosity, one almost prefers not to ruin the poem with their delivery. But Swenson took much care in her presentations. Whether from nerves or simply a strong work ethic, she rehearsed often and conscientiously, spending long hours with her poems and a tape recorder. You can be sure that when you hear her reading formally, you are hearing a carefully prepared performance. On the Caedmon recording, Swenson provides a word of introduction to each poem that she reads, as she would do before a live audience. She supplies a brief one here:

> This half-serious, half-comic wish poem, called "The Pure Suit of Happiness," has a pun in the title.

The Pure Suit of Happiness

The pure suit of happiness,
not yet invented. How I long
to climb into its legs,

fit into its sleeves, and zip
it up, pull the hood
over my head. It's got

a face mask, too, and gloves
and boots attached. It's
made for me. It's blue. It's

not too heavy, not too
light. It's my right.
It has its own weather,

which is youth's breeze,
equilibrated by the ideal
thermostat of maturity,

and built in, to begin with,
fluoroscopic goggles of
age. I'd see through

everything, yet be happy.
I'd be suited for life. I'd
always look good to myself.
[Sea Cliff, 1971]

In a way that reminds me of "achieved" versus "received," the poet keeps opposites interacting in this poem. The poem is half-serious, half-comic, she says by way of introduction. In the text, she repeats: it is not too heavy (serious), not too light (comic). Though its substance is happiness, nevertheless it's blue. Youth and maturity, too. Interestingly, though youth is more often figured as a source of heat (signifying impulse or passion), Swenson instead associates it with a cold breeze needing the warmth of maturity to moderate it. Slipping into the pure suit/pursuit, the poem's speaker will be suited (both clothed and prepared) for life. Through the goggles of age, she will look good to herself. The word play throughout is so obvious that one can only surmise she is teasing when she forewarns us that it's "half-serious, half-comic" and "has a pun in the title."

In spite of the binaries, the poet is most interested in moderation. She desires the invigorating breeze of youth, but tells us that a suitable happiness is achieved only when that cool breeze is tempered by maturity's thermostat. With the goggles of age, even maturity is extended or qualified. The goggles, we're told, are "built in to begin with"; the redundancy weakens the poem, but emphasizes how fundamental is the perspective that comes with age. The poet suggests here that without age, happiness is perhaps blind—unable to "see through everything" or even to see the good in oneself.

For our purposes, what's interesting is that in the "Pure Suit," and in the goggles particularly, we see again a speaker who believes in a knowable, stable reality. She wants to "see through everything"—more precisely, to see through appearances to the true shapes of everything. Almost as an aside, she adds "yet be happy," as if what is to be seen will necessarily be a disappointment—a common view from eyes of age. Thus, the goggles of age become the crucial equipment here. Through them, the poet's ironic technology gives access to "reality," allowing one to achieve knowledge of what lies on the other side of appearance.

Up to this point, we almost forget that Swenson described "The Pure Suit" as a "received" poem. Yet here at the end, I find myself nodding, because at least in these my middle years, happiness seems a dawning irony—more of a received gift than an achieved state. A way of seeing, indeed, a perception for which I wasn't suited in earlier years.

May Out West

Here's another received poem. She introduces it herself, but notice what fun Swenson had with traditional images of the American West—deliberately conflated with images from LDS tradition. At the end, the poet smiles at herself and her own era.

> In South Dakota one summer, on the way to Mount Rushmore, our car had to halt along with many others because a large herd of buffalo decided to cross the highway. At that point, watching in fascination while waiting, I began to receive this poem.
>
> Bison Crossing Near Mount Rushmore
>
> There is our herd of cars stopped,
> staring respectfully at the line of bison crossing.

One big-fronted bull nudges his cow into a run.
She and her calf are the first to cross.
In swift dignity the dark-coated caravan sweeps through
the gap our cars leave in the two-way stall
on the road to the Presidents.
The polygamous bulls guarding their families from the rear,
the honey-brown calves trotting head-to-hip
by their mothers—who are lean and muscled as bulls,
with chin tassels and curved horns—
all leap the road like a river, and run.
The strong and somber remnant of western freedom
disappears into the rough grass of the draw,
around the point of the mountain.
The bison, orderly, disciplined by the prophet-faced,
heavy-headed fathers, threading the pass
of our awestruck stationwagons, airstreams and trailers,
if in dread of us give no sign,
go where their leaders twine them, over the prairie.
And we keep to our line,
staring, stirring, revving idling motors, moving
each behind the other, herdlike, where the highway leads.
[South Dakota, 1973]

If nostalgic images of the West arise in the mind, it is because the poet intends to raise them, of course. "[T]he strong and somber remnant of western freedom / disappears . . ." She deliberately invests the buffalo with the familiar nobility and romance, not to mention nostalgia, with which Americans have been describing them for more than 150 years—since about the time Americans began to exterminate them. The role of US government policy in their extermination makes the poem's setting "on the road to the Presidents" especially ironic. In addition, as Swenson knows, human westerners are very fond of copping a pose as an endangered species, themselves. When not pandering to the tourist trade, they lament the decline of "the cowboy way," the lost ethos of the "Old West," or—where I'm from—of the "Golden Days" of the gold rush with its brutal, helter-skelter, winner-take-all version of "Western freedom." All of these do point to a diminishing set of folkways and an identifiable regional culture, but one assumes that Swenson knew they were just as fitting a set of images for the devastation of bison herds and bison habitat as they were for human liberty. The poet sketches it in one or two strokes of the pen.

Add to this irony the Mormon allusions in the poem. The Mormons, of course, put down roots in the Mountain West when it was still claimed by Mexico, seeking their own freedom here to escape, as they see it, persecution back East. Like many other westerners, conservative LDS folk still tend to see change from traditional ways as a loss, and to this they often readily supply a religious tone. Swenson receives this tone, trapped in the two-way stall on the road to the presidents, and she swiftly associates the Mormon patriarchy with the disappearing West and the vanishing buffalo. Those disciplining, polygamous bulls go by—"the prophet-faced, heavy-headed fathers"—somberly caravanning their women and children into the sunset. Her word "remnant" now sounds its proper Old Testament notes; the herd of beasts and the herd of cars morph into Conestoga wagons, and one imagines the bearded face of Brigham Young nodding pensively over all.

With "Bison Crossing," we find another sense in which May Swenson wants to *see through* everything. She is much admired for her acuity with the senses, and one sees in this poem how well she deserves her reputation. The lines are plain, like her Mountain West accent on the Caedmon recording, and they gain everything for that; her associations are pointed, amusing, unerring. As Camille Paglia writes, "For her, the artist is not a better person, but one who makes us see better" (196). Swenson prefers descriptive or narrative realism over artful symbolism, yet she does seem to think symbolically. "She finds renewal and rebirth in the common and universal" (Paglia 196). Those shaggy beasts, who begin the poem as bison stopping tourists on the two-lane road, end the poem as emblems of our own certain uncertain destiny somewhere down the road—"where the highway leads." The poet shows us our lives, in Paglia's phrase, "as a mazy journey with no goal but itself" (196). We will notice this symbolic turn of mind again below, and it suggests that she really does see . . . through everything. She sharpens our perception of the nonphysical by bringing the physical so sharply to our senses—in her own terms.

Receiving Trances

May Swenson traveled to the Southwest more than once, and some of my favorite Swenson poems were written about subjects she encountered there. Here is what she says about the poem we now know as "A Navajo Blanket":

"In Navajoland" is a trance poem of mine about color—in this case, the pure color and dazzling pattern of a Navajo Indian blanket which I came upon in Tucson, Arizona. Some 200 years ago, this beautiful, primitive, practical work of art was woven by a woman of the Navajo tribe, of threads dyed with earth colors, berry inks, animal blood—an object produced for warmth, for use. At the same time, because designed and made by the hands of a natural artist, there is permanent gladness in contemplating its craft and beauty.

In Navajoland

Eye-dazzlers the Indians weave. Three colors
are paths that pull you in and pin you
to the maze. Brightness makes your eyes jump,
surveying the geometric field. Alight, and enter
any of the gates—of Blue, of Red, of Black.
Be calmed and hooded, a hawk jerked down,
glad to fasten to the forearm of a Chief.

You can sleep at the center,
attended by Sun that never fades, by Moon
that cools. Then, slipping free of zigzag and
hypnotic diamond, find your way out
by the spirit trail, a faint Green thread that
secretly crosses the border, where your mind
is rinsed and returned to you like a white cup.

[Tucson, 1974–75; title later revised to "A Navajo Blanket"]

The later print version differs very slightly. In fact, the later title is better, since "Navajoland" is actually some three hundred miles to the northeast of Tucson. In addition, today, we might dispute some of her anthropology. Terms like "primitive," "tribe," "chief," and "natural artist" are not as easy to ignore as they used to be. We know that twentieth-century Navajos didn't weave blankets for warmth so much as for trade. And finally, there is no tradition of falconry, as far as I know, among the Navajos. However, these issues don't involve the poem's substance, and in the 1970s, few American poetry readers would find any of this exceptionable.

The importance of the poem is Swenson's interest in the mind. She calls it a "trance poem," in that peculiar way poets have of assigning genres.

(You'll recall that "Pure Suit" was a "wish poem.") From her first word, "eye-dazzlers," the poem opens into a meditative state, and the weave she extends line by line describes a blanket pattern that indeed could have suggested a trance. A "maze" was perhaps originally more a puzzle than a prayer, but in modern usage it has become synonymous with "labyrinth," the classic aid to reflection and meditation in a number of cultures, and this is how Swenson is using the term too.[1] A space for spacing out.

"You can sleep at the center," the poet tells us. Through sleep, we enter the land of dreams, a province everywhere associated with knowledge received. In "the center," as well, we find the poet's most successful intuition, since centering and balance are vital themes to the Navajos, as they are to many other First Nations cultures. Navajos associate both beauty and mental health explicitly with harmony. Traditional Navajos even today may undertake week-long ceremonies of fasting, feasting, singing, and meditation to cleanse a life and restore it to balance. In this light, the poem's closing image becomes even more vivid. This is the state toward which the poem line by line moves—the state of the mind emerging from such an experience, from such a trance—and it is well-pictured as an emptied, rinsed, white cup. On the Caedmon recording, Swenson relates this state of mind to the title of her book *Half Sun Half Sleep*: "the primitive bipolar suspension in which my poems often begin to form." She is much invested in such a state, because that balance between waking and the world of dream is the state of consciousness one must achieve, as any prophet knows, before one can hear the still small voice of received knowledge.

Dear Elizabeth

May Swenson left a considerable body of work in what she came to call "iconographic" formats, and it's fairly clear from her earliest experimentations that her arrangement of type on the page was deliberate, calculated, and effortful. Whereas "the poem"—its words—may have been received knowledge, the shape of things on the page was an achieved effect. She

1. On the other hand, I don't believe the Navajos have such a tradition. One of the more familiar maze patterns in southwestern Native American traditional arts is the "Man in a Maze" pattern of the Tohono O'odham, which is not used in the European manner as an aid to meditation. It is said, rather, to symbolize life and choice, the search for balance, the path of a human being through life—and, more originally, perhaps, the Tohono O'odham creation/emergence story. But Swenson is not expounding cultural material here or claiming the maze for the Navajos, so much as she is responding to it from personal impressions.

will later work up this intuition into an explicit statement of technique, but even by 1953, in her correspondence with Elizabeth Bishop, we find an exchange that reveals something of Swenson's early approach to unconventional typography. Just prior to this exchange, she had shared with Bishop a draft in which she abandoned punctuation. Bishop was not impressed. "Contemporary French poetry often does what you do . . . and it is purely annoying. I think if you intend to write only poems that can be . . . understood without punctuation you are limiting yourself rather disastrously" (letter July 1953). Here is the danger of the avant garde, isn't it? Even those whom we might reasonably expect to understand what we're about can let us down. In response, Swenson offered an explanation that Bishop really shouldn't have needed. "It takes an extra discipline," she argued, for the poet to work this way. In addition, "The reader is induced to concentrate a little harder . . . can't skim over the surface." Notice how she frames it in terms of mental effort; quite clearly we're in the realm of knowledge achieved. And notice that she sees the effort required from both writer and reader. *Dear Elizabeth, work with me here.*

This, then, is a classic discussion about technique and the role of convention in writing. Ever the patrician, Elizabeth Bishop is a Platonist; form is not something she would have disturbed. Convention gives us all we need; the writer is accountable to tradition, and the reader is a consumer. So, to Bishop, experimentation is purely annoying—trivial at best and potentially disastrous. May Swenson advocates a more progressive writing theory; she sees the writer and reader in league, both working hard to create and to interpret their joint creation. Her understanding of rhetorical context seems Aristotelian; her textual theory sounds like Rosenblatt and Iser; and, in loosening the hold of syntax on the word, she glances toward the concrete poets. This is the stance of the avant garde—of the technique pioneer, one might say—this willingness to reconfigure the maps of convention. Swenson's defense here brings to mind the story of Marcel Duchamp, whose cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* she invokes in the poem "The DNA Molecule." A cubist nude was an idea that many critics were unable to process. On its first gallery showing, the piece was described as "an explosion in a shingle factory." Duchamp was persuaded to withdraw it, but "all the same," he wrote in his journal, "it moves" (Sirc 34).

It's interesting that this Swenson/Bishop exchange should take place in 1953 and that neither poet should mention the vigorous discussion of visual poetry taking place around the world at that time. Bishop does refer to the annoying French, but dismisses them as if they are alone in their oddity. In fact, 1953 was the year in which Augusto de Campos published

Poetamenos in São Paolo—Brazil, that is, where Bishop lived. De Campos and friends had established the Noigandres group there three years earlier and were exchanging regularly with concrete poets and artists from several countries—including France, of course, but also Switzerland, Austria, and, by the end of the decade, even Japan. According to Mary Ellen Solt, not much concrete was going on in the U.S. (though Ezra Pound and e. e. cummings were icons around the world), but elsewhere, the question of form in poetry and in the other arts was much in dispute. Duchamp and Calder were active. Idealism was ascendant. Manifestoes were being written. What interests me about all this is that in these few pages of the Swenson/Bishop correspondence, we can see Swenson in the 1950s beginning to test some of the same concretist, post-symbolist ideas about form—which she will later develop into a major theme in her work. As an odd but provocative aside, we might notice that with the word *noigandres*, de Campos and company invoke Pound (Canto XX: "noigandres / Now what the deffil can that mean!"), and then remember that Pound first published with James Laughlin at New Directions, for whom May Swenson worked as a manuscript reader in the 1950s (Knudson and Bigelow 57).

Writing and Thinking

From what we've seen so far, it seems May Swenson might have felt at home with the approach to writing theory later called expressivism or expressionism, represented by such major figures as Janet Emig, Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray. Like these theorists of the 1970s, Swenson took a keen interest in the cognitive process of invention, of expression, and she was more than willing to break with the established order in order to achieve a desired effect. Yet Swenson's concept of "knowledge received" seems to conflict with her friend Janet Emig's watershed article, "Writing as a Mode of Thinking." In this article, Emig argues from experimental research that the very act of writing and the cognitive processes associated with learning are mutually stimulative. Or, as expressivists often put it, one writes in order to find out what one thinks. Swenson's received knowledge, in contrast, almost implies a passive role for the writer: "to record." This position makes her vulnerable to the critique of the expressivists that James Berlin articulates throughout his work—for example in *Rhetoric and Reality*.

For Berlin, the major failing of the expressivists (and let's acknowledge that Berlin invents this label, a grand reductive move in the first place) is

that they are insufficiently contextual or rhetorical, take too little notice of the social and cultural context in which writing necessarily occurs. In what is still a surprisingly unchallenged caricature, Berlin sketches the expressionists as (one infers) rhetorically naive, concerned overly with invention *qua* Romantic "inspiration" and not enough with the gritty Aristotelian *polis* where one must invent *to* and *for* an audience, *from within* a context situated in and limited by cultural imperatives.

But in the 1953 correspondence we see that Swenson wants to balance received with achieved. Unlike Berlin's stereotype of the expressivists and the Romantic tradition, she is deeply committed to connecting with the Other, on the other side of the page. To Swenson, the reader can be induced to go deep, can't skim, must concentrate, must co-create; both writer and reader have an active role in creation of the text. As Gudrun Grabher contends in her chapter in this volume, May Swenson hardly opens an eye, an *I,* in her poems, without reflecting in it a *you*. She is deeply interested in her context and audience.

One is tempted, then, to read May Swenson's writing theory through the work of those who (reappropriating Berlin's simplistic category) have called themselves "social expressivists." Sherrie Gradin comes to mind, as do Wendy Bishop, Lad Tobin, and others, though Swenson predates them by decades. This connection highlights Swenson's deliberate and ongoing negotiation with her reader. If the form of her typography is "a device" calculated to induce the reader to concentrate, then clearly she is rhetorically aware. She asks us to read her wonderful mind indeed, but the very act of inviting the reader to go beyond skimming is already acknowledgment of, and collaboration with, her audience. Her concern in readings and written commentaries to explain, to give us an explicit theoretical entré to her process is further evidence of love for audience and her unwillingness to be rhetorically opaque. Poetry for Swenson is an access to the world of the senses, and providing this access "is done with words; with their combination—sometimes with their unstringing" (*Iconographs* 87). I love the word "unstringing." Language becomes a bracelet of beads, and the poet is allowed to snip the string. "If so, it is in order to make the mind re-member (by dismemberment) the elements, the smallest particles, ventricles, radicals, down to, or into, the Grain—the buried grain of language . . . on which depends the transfer of Sense."[2] Thus, if she invents a typographical effect, if she dismembers the word or the page, this

2. Her language here, taken from *Iconographs*, 87, recalls Pierre Garnier and his amazing aim "to pulverize" (*pulveriser*) the word. Garnier would have been the kind of French poet that Elizabeth Bishop found "purely annoying."

is calculated to make the familiar unfamiliar, so that we may re-member it as an available means of effect or persuasion. "It moves," she tells us. This may leave a reader nonplussed, but never unwelcomed.

Writing Like Lightning

Of course, May Swenson went far beyond composing without punctuation. In comments on the Caedmon collection following "The Lightning," she offered a glimpse of her emerging theory of iconographic poetry: "['The Lightning'] is a pivotal poem in my book *Half Sun Half Sleep*—a title indicative of the primitive bipolar suspension in which my poems often begin to form. One of my devices is to work a visual metaphor by means of the typography. As seen on the page, there is a streak of white space that runs diagonally through the body of the poem, symbolizing the lightning, and this even splits some of the words."

Both of Swenson's realms—the *received* and the *achieved*—are represented in these remarks. We know already that she *receives* many poems "by way of the subconscious" through a trancelike suspension, as she did "In Navajoland" and "Bison Crossing." Poems, for her, are born—and recall that she means the *words* of the poem arrive that way: the "language and message." The word is the privileged category; arrangement is something else. Arrangement takes effort, an *extra* (an additional) discipline. Even though she may be creating a "visual metaphor," this creation is not a birth, but a work, a device. "One of my devices." One would suppose that for another writer (and certainly for a visual artist) these categories might be reversed, with the visual arrangement appearing first by inspiration before the mind's eye. But for Swenson, the "message" was *received,* and the shape of words on the page is all about artifice and technique; it's a knowledge *achieved* by mental effort.

She gives us a little more in *Iconographs*.

> To have material and mold evolve together and become a symbiotic whole. To cause an instant object-to-eye encounter with each poem even before it is read word-after-word. To have simultaneity as well as sequence. To make an existence in space, as well as in time, for the poem. These have been, I suppose, the impulses behind the typed shapes and frames invented for this collection. . . .
>
> I have not meant the poems to depend upon, or depend from, their shapes or their frames; these were thought of only after the

> whole language structure and behavior was complete in each instance. What the poems say or show, their way of doing it with *language*, is the main thing. . . .
>
> With the physical senses we meet the world and each other—a world of objects, human and otherwise, where words on a page are objects, too. The first instrument to make contact, it seems to me, and the quickest to report it, is the eye. The poems in *Iconographs*, with their profiles, or space patterns, or other graphic emphases, signal that they are to be seen, as well as read and heard, I suppose. (86–87)

Her Brazilian contemporaries and other concrete poets by this point have put aside the form vs. content dilemma as insoluble, but it still interests May Swenson. And why not? It has interested European discourse about art since the Greeks came up with the idea of *mimesis*. Try as we might to read a poem at its surface, we always find ourselves looking to game the system, staring right through a work of art in hope of a meaning beyond. As I draft this page, for example, Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's installation *The Gates* is being unveiled in Central Park, and New Yorkers are asking each other, "What the deffil can it mean?" It's almost impossible, given our tradition of thought, *not* to try to "see through everything." But by 1953, as we noticed, May Swenson already wanted the reader to think of a poem not so much (or not only) as a code with hidden meaning, but to experience it also as an object on a page. Her comment against skimming notwithstanding, it is a fact that to mess about with punctuation inevitably draws attention to the *surface* of convention, if not yet to the senses. Her 1970 remarks in *Iconographs* reflect an additional seventeen years of consideration, and here she describes consciously manipulating the surface, the profile, "the graphic emphasis," and deliberately shaping the poem so as to "make contact" with the senses of the reader. Her idea of dismemberment, noted above, or even of simply seeing the word as an object in space, is much in tune with the "purely annoying" French of her day. (Elizabeth Bishop sniffs here and flicks a crumb from a white saucer.) The French, like Pierre Garnier, whose manifesto called for a new aesthetic of *Spatialisme* in poetry. "Every word is an abstract picture," he wrote. "A surface . . . an element. The word is a material. The word is an object. . . . We must grind our well-worn language to dust" ("Manifeste" np). We must unstring it.

Even here, however, Swenson's rationalism isn't tempted to go as far as *Spatialisme* and let go of the *form/content* binary, but she does move

them into an almost equal partnership. The word "iconograph" itself gives them equal billing,[3] as do her alliterative pairings "material/mold" and "sequence/simultaneity." She even allows that for a reader, there is "an instant object-to-eye encounter," with comprehension of the words following in its own time. A "symbiotic whole," she writes, and one begins to think, yes, she does mean this, maybe she does think of the poem as a visual object in space. But then she takes it all back on the next page. "*[L]anguage* is the main thing." The visual is a "device," she says. Frames (paradoxically, since Swenson's father was an artist in the woodshop), mere visual frames, are not meant to carry the weight of the poems: frames are not what the poems "depend upon or depend from." Always, in composing the iconographs, visual comes *after* verbal.

I don't have any remarks from Swenson about the wonderful, multigenre "Rainbow Hummingbird Lamplight," but as it was written in 1980, a decade after *Iconographs* was published, I'm ready to speculate that she had by then pushed her explanations yet further. In the opening to that poem, shape and subject are one indeed, and she exemplifies the remark of Susan Sontag that one need not place "matter on the inside, style on the outside. . . . The mask *is* the face" (18). Or, perversely, as in Garnier's ideal, all masks have fallen, setting words and poets and readers free—free as a rock, free as a wave. "Suddenly [the poet] finds himself in this world without pope, without king, without religion and without recourse—like the trees and the birds, the dancers and the boats, the waves. And he himself is tree and bird and dancer and boat and wave—free, now that all the masks have fallen" ("Deuxième manifeste" qtd in Solt 33).

(*Ah, the sixties in Paris . . .*)

A Theory of Everything

Listen to what May Swenson says about "How Everything Happens" on the Caedmon recording: "'How Everything Happens (Based on a Study of the Wave)' is a very simple iconograph of only six lines—each line a sentence—and what each line says, it does. That is, it visually acts

3. I'm not sure why Swenson needed the term "iconograph." "Figured" and "shaped" have been employed for centuries to describe typographically diverse verse. "Concrete" and "visual" were also much in use during Swenson's era for work similar to what she creates—though often with a different language/image balance (see Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry* for a survey.) She explains how she means "iconograph" in her afterword to *Iconographs*, but why she rejected other terms remains a mystery. Perhaps she felt that more common names for the genre were constricting or imprecise. Perhaps she appreciated how the term "iconograph" itself both forces and maintains the tension between material and mold, received and achieved

out its statement. [The poem] comprises a philosophical formula that can be applied to events in general, including the event of creative writing." Swenson then reads the poem (see below) and follows up with these remarks: "On the page, the words of each line stack up or pull back, and only in the case of the line 'nothing is happening' is the line typed conventionally straight. My iconographic arrangements are a very conscious device employed only after the poem is completed in terms of its language and its message. One analogy could be that of a painter who thinks of a frame that will fit and enhance his work only after his canvas is complete. The text of the poem must be knowledge received, while aspects in the technique of presentation are achieved consciously."

Text and technique. Received and achieved. Alicia Ostriker implies in her chapter that it is risky for writers to take strong positions on writing, and I have to agree with her. Still, don't you love May Swenson's impulse to totalize? My instinct has always been to stress the verb in this poem's title—"How Everything *Happens*"—but that's wrong. When Swenson reads the title aloud, her inflection tells you just what she means: this is a poem about how *everything* happens. Then the subtitle: "Based on a Study of the Wave." *The* Wave. The Platonic wave. And most of all, I love this: it "comprises a philosophical formula that can be generalized to all events." Like dividing knowledge into achieved and received, these are categorical pronouncements, claims of a sort that criticism left behind with . . . you know, whatever we did before deconstruction. We can't say these things in our day of ambivalence, aporia, and the indeterminate signifier. Scholars are bureaucrats now; we can't say these things.

Then she offers the quiet remark we're quite likely to overlook: even creative writing follows this pattern of the wave. Indulgent smiles all around. It sounds like humor, like self-mockery. We almost miss it here, and in fact we *do* miss it if we've only read the poem and haven't heard Swenson introduce it as on the Caedmon collection. *Even creative writing,* she claims. Even, asks a student in the back, um like, the writing of this poem? This is when we see what she's done. In a six-line poem, by device and design *achieved*, she unpacks for us the very experience of knowledge *received.*

Six lines. Eliminate the duplicates, and there are only nineteen words in the poem. Nineteen words to exemplify how *everything*—including the composition of a deeply ambitious philosophical poem—happens. And, ironically, much of this poem's ambition is in how it aims to contradict our intuition that the creative is complex. Knowledge *received* isn't complex; it's only deep. Consider the words of the poem in its most reduced form, "only six lines—each line a sentence":

When nothing is happening, something is stacking up to happen.
When it happens, something pulls back not to happen.
When pulling back happens stacking up has happened.
When it has happened something pulls back while nothing stacks up.
Then nothing is happening.
Then something stacks up pushes forward and happens.

A friend of mine is an artist, a designer of medical equipment and medical procedures. He describes his creative process quite simply as a period of waiting between two important moments. The first moment is when he understands a design question (*What must this object or process achieve?*), and second, at the far end of the process, is the moment when the resolution occurs to him. Between the two, he must keep his pencil in motion. What he draws at any given moment, he says, may create momentum and push him toward resolution, or it may only distract, pulling him back or in another direction. Sometimes nothing is happening. Regardless, he knows that this trough of waiting between question and answer is finite, and the resolution will form in his mind when he has given it enough drafts to work with. When the moment is right, everything happens.

Even in the simple sentence form above, Swenson's prosody mimics the rhythm of a wave, as does the conceptual material, with its stacking up and pulling back. In this form, what she calls the language or message is interesting, but not compelling. The "device" is needed. (See next page.)

It takes the sculpting of the lines in space to create the immediate object-to-eye encounter. Still, look at it; at least to my own immediate eye, in the form achieved here in its official *Iconographs* version, the fluidity of wave motion isn't evident enough. The object my eyes encounter (say, if I hold it at arm's length, where without my glasses the graphé blurs into icon) is more of a thunderbolt. A mystifying zigzag, semiotically unrelated to the language and message of the sea. As a reader, I still have work to do—or play to do—before the object in the poet's mind comes as well to my own.

One can't help thinking of the limitations of the 1960s typewriter and of the page in "portrait" mode when the poet's conception is "landscape" (or in this case, *seascape*). Mallarmé had a similar problem: the visual conception of his poem "'Un coup de dés" was quite simply too wide for the materials of writing—of printing, rather—available at the time of its composing.

How Everything Happens (Based on a Study of the Wave)

happen.
to
up
stacking
is
something
When nothing is happening

When it happens
something
pulls
back
not
to
happen.

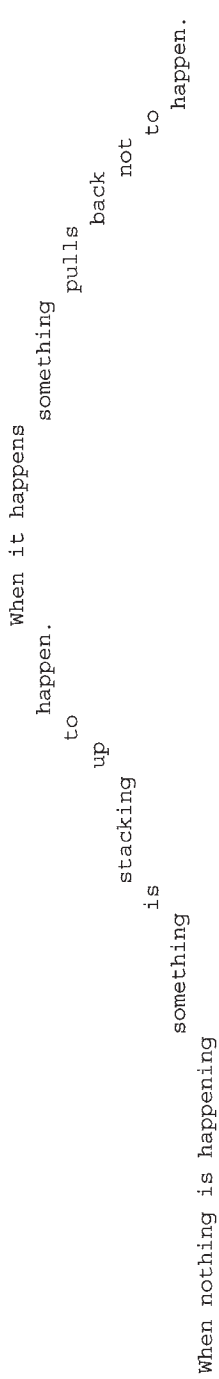
When has happened.
pulling back stacking up
happens

has happened stacks up.
When it something nothing
pulls back while

Then nothing is happening.

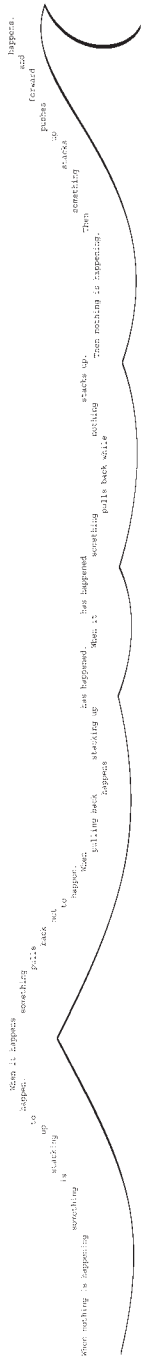
happens.
and
forward
pushes
up
stacks
something
Then

[Sea Cliff, New York, 1967] (*Iconographs* 70)



Apollinaire and cummings more strategically composed for the size of page they knew lay ahead at the printer's. Swenson did the same most of the time. But with "How Everything Happens," she faced a dilemma. The wave on the sea—in its stacking up and its pulling back, its nothing and its happening—always composes itself in horizontals, and horizontals are not well-represented on the vertically oriented page, even on the large-format page of *Iconographs*. Swenson finds that what she can achieve in shaping and framing within the limits of her technology will not, cannot, bear the weight of the received poem. she finds the page forcing her to saw the sea into stove-lengths stacked vertically. It is only by mentally unstacking the poem, trebling the page width, and imagining the lines laid end to end that I can "see" what the poet saw. Teaching the poem to university students, I had to do this literally before they could truly read it. In fact, I used a computer slide program to roll the lines out from left to right, end to end, with May Swenson's recorded voice reciting them in the background. (You'll have to turn the book sideways.)

And so on. What this did for the students was to show concretely the effort that a reader is induced to make in order to achieve the visual effect that the poet means to create. Here we *see* as well as hear how the poem is inspired by the primal, meditative, hypnotic rhythms of the sea. The language mimes this rhythm in its simplicity and repetition. And in this visual shape, the poem suggests that knowledge received indeed can arrive in an instant object-to-eye encounter with the material world. And look what lies hidden in "How Everything Happens," which our eye would have encountered immediately if only it had been composed in PowerPoint.



Ah, said my students. *Waves.*

Any slave to the materiality of print will realize, of course, that this is not the shape Swenson actually, finally, created on the page, and thus in a pure sense, the poem I am reading here is at some remove from her original. However, just as clearly, what she imaged suggests and (I would say) requires the reader to re-arrange her lines in the imagination, requires me to dismember (in order to re-member) them and lay them end to end this way, in order to make convincing the conceit of the wave as the motivating form. We're in the realm of transactional theory, in other words, or reader-response theory, whose signal contribution to criticism is to argue that the poem does not exist except as and when it exists in the mind of the reader. For my students, the poem as Swenson shaped it (and evidently read it herself) could not exist at all until after they went through this process of *re*shaping it in their own minds. I submit that this is more than a pedagogical gimmick. Just as she predicted in 1953, Swenson induced her readers to concentrate, not to skim over the surface. Having achieved her process on their own terms, the students could return to Swenson's original form and receive her language and message.

Charting Material and Mold

Her process. Let's recount the ideas that seem to be continuously pulling back and stacking up in May Swenson's theory of writing. We can organize them usefully in two columns.

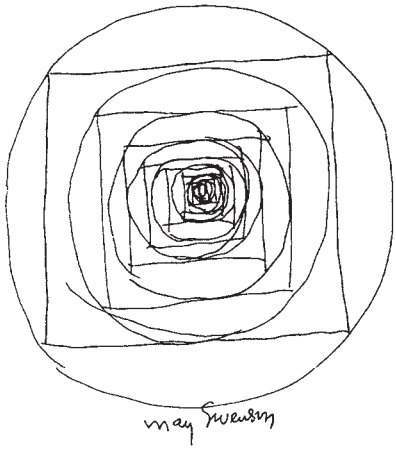
Knowledge Achieved	*Knowledge Received*
effort	instinct
reason	revelation
device	trance
style	content
mold	material
sensation	sense
Modernism	Romanticism
conscious mind	subconscious mind
shape/arrangement	language/meaning
"an extra discipline"	"without apparent strain"
materiality of print	inspiration of language
frame	painting
icono	graph
square	circle

Throughout the Caedmon collection and its related texts, we see this lovely symmetry, every term balanced by another, a pillar of white space holding two knowledges in tension. Even in *Iconographs*, Swenson flirts with parity: "no grain of sense [the word], without sensation [the image]" (87). Still, the poet insists that, for her, language comes first because the poem is made of words—and words, for a mind as verbally accomplished as May Swenson's, take less "mental effort." They're born, they descend, they're *received* in a trancelike state, the mind rinsed and ready to be filled. For her, it's the image that takes work to achieve.

Yet one returns to "Rainbow Hummingbird Lamplight."

[Dorland MT, 1980]

Only a few years past Caedmon, the image lands lightly as thought, as though it, too, descended fully formed from some higher mind. Words on this page are gently dismembered and defamiliarized, arranged and rearranged, until they are truly objects—objects to be experienced, with no concern about seeing through to an interpretation and no anxiety about the difference between frames and language. This time, the poet transcends her own categories, and "Rainbow" cannot be understood in terms reducible to achieved and received. Both do appear, but what the eye immediately apprehends is an ideal equilibration of the two—neither achieved nor received, but an object to be *perceived*. And May Swenson has again created a trompe l'oeil for us of two simple parts, telescoping away to a third realm, where the two balance and integrate, where knowledge is one, and the poem leaves us looking into the bottom of a rinsed white cup.



The Queer Poetics of May Swenson

Suzanne Juhasz

The lens of academic queer theory seems to me to be an especially useful perspective for viewing the poetry of May Swenson—especially her unconventional representations of gender, sexuality, and desire. The meanings of "queer" as it is used in contemporary academic theory include to skew, to destabilize, and to open gaps, resonances, and possibilities. In such ways Swenson's poetic language constructs identities that shift, change, and interact. In this process they attain forms that query and subvert conventional definitions. I wish to call Swenson's poetics and practices queer, because I wish to find a use for the queer lens to observe something other than biography or subject matter *per se*. The fact that Swenson was a lesbian, or that she wrote some (although not many) poems overtly about lesbian experience, is not my focus here. If we see queer operating as a principle in literary language, we can extend and enrich our concept of queer art beyond pointing to the literal facts of a poet's life or subject matter.

What exactly is queer? *Queer* is a verb, an adjective, and a noun. The verb means to skew or thwart. The adjective means unconventional, strange, suspicious. Queer as a noun was originally a derogatory term used for male homosexuals. It has been reclaimed as a tool to question and disarrange normative systems of behavior and identity in our culture, especially as they regulate gender, sexuality, and desire. Here are some definitions from well-known queer theorists. Donald Hall says that to queer presses upon systems of classifications to torture their lines of demarcation (14). According to Eve Sedgwick queer refers to "the open mesh of

possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). Diana Fuss writes that queer imaginatively enacts "sexual redefinitions, reborderizations, and rearticulations" (7).

In many of her poems May Swenson queers conventional gender definitions and in the process views desire as a force that erupts and is sustained by the interchange rather than the distinctiveness of gender polarities. Focusing on the active/passive dialectic so commonly tied to traditional definitions of masculine and feminine, Swenson shows not only that one need not be a man to be active, a woman to be passive, but that these qualities in tandem, as they fluctuate between persons, can spark fluidity, agitations, shape-shifting, and transfers. In this space desire can play. This queer desire is not the thrill of dominating or submitting: "I want to take you!" or "Take me!" Rather, it is inspired by both sameness and difference, by the contingency or complementarity of the selves who engage in it. Queer desire presents an alternative to traditional heterosexuality, whether it is specifically homosexual or not.

To explore queer desire this paper moves from Swenson's "nature poems" to her "love poems" (these categories blur on many occasions) to show how her basic interest in the process of identity formation, which she generally understands by way of the body and the senses, is heightened when she confronts the pressures of conformity that are systematically engaged when gender and sexuality come into the picture. Swenson, an inveterate observer of nature, could not help but notice and represent the changes in natural forms effected by the process of time, or what is called mutability. This organizing, even spiritual, principle has long been a staple in English poetry, and it is certainly observable in some of Swenson's poems that take a keen look at natural phenomena. However, her interest in "unconceived fluidities and agitations" (a phrase from her poem, "A Subject of the Waves") is a little different, for the shapes that shift in many of her poems are under pressure from forces other than time. These are the forces of culture. But Swenson tries to evade, even subvert them. "If I am observing something," says Swenson in an interview, "I don't think about its name or label to begin with. I think of how it is affecting me" (McFall 105). Significantly, she seeks to allow her personal sensory response to observed forms to direct how she identifies them and their relationships with one another.

"For me," says Swenson in another interview, "nature includes everything: the entire universe, the city, the country, the human mind, human

creatures, and the animal creatures" (McFall 121). In her poems humans and natural phenomena interface and interchange, and these crossings seem to have less to do with humanistic principles such as mutability or even metamorphosis (a developmental function of time) than with the idiosyncratic responses that this poet experiences. And when gender and sexuality are the subject of her focus, as in, in particular, her love poems, her non-normative view and experience make these poems slyly contentious and suggestively radical, as they offer some unconventional alternatives. The transfers and transformations that occur repeatedly throughout the poems between natural phenomena and humans occur as well between people: in particular, between (or across) genders. "The world," she says, "is made up of male, female, and combinations thereof" (McFall 123). These "combinations thereof" are of special interest to her as she evokes the ways in which love and desire influence the formation of identity.

Looking at poetry through a queer lens brings me, not surprisingly, to language. Language serves as a site for queering, and the prevailing linguistic form by which such combinations and transfers occur in May Swenson's poetry is metaphor. Metaphor, which means in Greek *to carry across or transfer,* is a traditional trope for linguistic shape-shifting. As such, it has been used by poets throughout time for many purposes. Yet metaphor, it turns out, has a lot in common with queer, because, as Sedgwick notes, "The word 'queer' itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root—*twerkw*, which also yields the German *queer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist)" (xii). We can see metaphor as a way to queer language, especially because in its process one thing does not become another as much as a third thing is created, something composed of the *relationship* between the original two—a relationship based in both commonality and difference. Not A=B but A+B=C. For example, the phrase, "Our limbs like eels / are water boned" from Swensons's poem, "Swimmers," contains one simile ("like eels") and one metaphor, "limbs are . . . water-boned." There is no such thing as bones made of water—until metaphor makes it so. Loose limbed would be close, but the point of the phrase is also to connect the two lovers with water creatures, eels, and then with water itself: water-boned. I will return to this metaphor later.

Swenson says that "nature includes everything." Metaphor is her choice for yoking experiential components to create an everything. There are no tenors and vehicles here. The real work of metaphor is to create relationships—ones we may not have noticed before—in which A and B are companionate, not hierarchical. For example, when reading her poem called "Subconscious Sea," to ask whether the sea is a metaphor for the

mind or the mind is a metaphor for the sea is the wrong question (*Nature: Poems Old and New* 69–70). The poem is about how and in what ways they partake of one another. The sea is an image for the subconscious part of the mind, even as the observer of nature (a role in which Swenson consistently casts herself) is asking to be excited and enlightened by thinking about the sea:

> Oh to cast the mind
> into that cool green trough
> to be washed and dashed
> and twirled and dipped
> between those waves

The "cool green trough" could be a metaphor for nature's sea, reminding us not only of its depth but that it is a place from which one can take emotional or philosophical sustenance. All that washing and dashing and twirling and dipping could be read as invigoration. *Or* the trough could be read as the depths of the subconscious, into which consciousness plunges for that same sort of insight. What is revealed is an overlap or metaphoric relationship between the mind and the sea. The sea is related to the subconscious because *both* can provide this service. In this fashion they are linked.

The lines that follow underline this association, as the sea is personified (since the sea and the mind are aspects of one another) by way of metaphor: "Delicious the swipe of a green wave / Across this puzzled forehead." The remainder of the poem expands upon its initial conceit. Through a long night the speaker longs to drop "this enigmatic clot" (the tangle of her *thoughts*, I imagine) down the "nebulous stairs" of the sea, so as to rest at last on the ocean's floor. Then comes the final stanza:

> There beneath layers
> of a thousand waves
> a thousand veils between it
> and the sun
> this frail bowl
> nuzzled in sand
> salt grains sifting its sockets
> would come to rest
> taste its own eternity

The conscious mind is represented metaphorically as both an enigmatic clot and a frail bowl. As it sinks into the unconscious, or the bottom of

the sea, it sinks as well into the archaic past or future: "its own eternity." Trouble is, the final image is awfully like a shipwreck or a drowned corpse that is gradually turning into the sea, as salt grains sift its sockets. Therefore the sea as the source for stimulation or enlightenment turns into a site for the loss of the conscious mind (or sun) that is human life. Thus this final descent is a death—it's either literal or figurative drowning. For a poet like Swenson, who admires both the subconscious and the beneficial effects of sea-gazing, this cautionary tale may well point to the dangers of relinquishing the powers of the intellect, or the seashore, too completely.

Linguistically, this poem employs figures of speech, notably metaphors, both locally and globally, to construct a metonymic connection between mind and sea. The process destabilizes traditional borders of taxonomy and opens up possibilities for identities that are fluid. This gesture is not quite what we would call "queer," because queer is usually involved with gender and sexuality, but as a habitual mode of thinking and writing for Swenson, it makes possible her unconventional explorations of desire, sexuality, and gender.

Swenson's poem "Swimmers" also appears in her collection *Nature: Poems Old and New*, I expect because there is so much ocean in it (218). However, the central metaphor or conceit is ocean/desire (A/B). It is a poem about sex, aquatic and human, as making love is shown to be a maritime activity. The conceit of the poem is that sexual intercourse equals being "Tossed/by the muscular sea" (the poem's opening lines). Indeed, the central metaphoric phrase in the poem is "the surf of desire."

This sea is muscular, it is "rough love." Desire is "surf," because it is rough water. "Total delight" is a "terror." The poem details the lovers' coming together, climaxing, and finally resting on the shore (of sleep), by way of their watery experience. For example, they are "sucked to the root / of the water-mountain— / immense—" Thus we learn something about both the nature of their sexual activities and its oceanic dimensions.

In their passion the lovers become watery:

> Our limbs like eels
> are water-boned,
> our faces lost
> to difference and
>
> contour, as the lapping
> crests.

The fluidity achieved by way of water-boned makes possible the crucial phrase, "Our faces lost / to difference and // contour, as the lapping crests." As the lapping of the waves (or tongues) crests (reaches climax), the lovers are lost to difference: they lose their distinctive boundaries in their partnership with one another and with the sea.

The sea is clearly more than an analogy for the lovers' activities. It participates in and partakes of desire—a desire which is, therefore, not limited to the human sphere. Indeed, the physical structure of the poem on the page—four stanzas to the left, four to the right, with the final stanza, in which the lovers reach the shores of sleep, balanced between the two columns (for this is the shore and no longer the sea) testifies to the metaphoric relation between humans and nature by way of desire.

Throughout, the poem insists that the active nature of the ocean is what controls the actions of the lovers: they are sucked, towed, made to race, and rocked—until "supine," they glide to the shores of sleep. In this way the lovers' acts may be seen to have a passive component, for they are in service of and served by desire, oceanic in its natural/monumental power. Thus, although the lovers are not gendered here, the poem does tweak gender in its discussion of desire. Desire is "masculine" (active), the lovers are "feminine" (passive), but of course, it *their* desire. They can be both lost to difference and they can generate or take part in an experience of difference (i.e., active/passive) and profit from it.

In these ways metaphoric language produces shape-shifting: it traverses, twists, or queers our understanding of experience, as the urgent and all-powerful force of desire is linguistically manifested as both sex and sea. We understand desire in a new way that does in fact "reborderize" (Diana Fuss's word) its meaning. First, because as a human experience it is seen in terms of its foundations in the natural world. Second, more interestingly yet, because it functions as a transfer between two lovers that plays along the active/passive scale without assigning these traditional signifiers of gender to either partner alone. I would say that this love poem is queer without being particularly homosexual.

On the other hand, the association of queer as verb, adjective, or noun with sexuality and gender is frequently used to articulate and find a space for "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 62)—that is, something other than normative heterosexuality. Certainly, queer has been used "sometimes abusively, and other times endearingly, as a colloquial term for homosexuality" (Sullivan v). When we turn to Swenson's love poetry, we see that it is the interplay and interchange between genders, its "unconceived fluidities and agitations,"

that interest her, because this is what sparks and enhances erotic desire. I think that queer occurs when genders are not normative. Queer that is homosexual (in this case, lesbian) occurs when genders are not normative and sexed bodies are same.

Swenson's love poems are sometimes lesbian narratives, sometimes not; but throughout they are tales of queer desire. They are characterized by an eroticism that is often playful and always central: the sensuality that is everpresent in her nature poems becomes more urgent when it articulates human love. By and large, critical commentary on Swenson has neglected these poems, which were collected in 1991 in a volume entitled *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*.[1] When critics have looked at Swenson and sexuality, they have generally focused on whether or not the love poems are explicitly about lesbians—with most people, like Maxine Kumin in her foreword to the volume, asserting Swenson's reticence about these matters and gratefully seeing the poems as more about the "human condition." "Setting these *role-playing* poems aside," writes Kumin, "the majority of Swenson's love poems are human you-and-I poems, or we poems, exquisitely tender and understated" (ix, my emphasis). I don't think that she and I are reading the same volume, for aside from the fact that just about all of the love poems are about this "role-playing," there are quite a few that are bold, sexy, and lesbian.

Sue Russell, on the other hand, in "A Mysterious and Lavish Power: How Things Continue to Take Place in the Work of May Swenson," celebrates the lesbian content of the poems, in the places where she can find it. Furthermore, Mark Doty, in a recent paper about Swenson and her poetic relationship to lesbianism, sees the "thrilling dance of reticence and self-disclosure" in her poems not as a ploy or an evasion but as a dialogic, a driving force in her work, an aesthetic (89, 92). In her complex positioning of her sexual identity, he observes, Swenson writes as if she is protecting a secret that is not really a secret, and that very stance, I think, occasions the queer sweet thrills of the reader.

Kirstin Zona's work, informed by queer theory, recognizes how gender is always at issue in these poems, no matter the pronouns. Referencing Judith Butler, she observes how Swenson's sexual imagery can be subversive in its "appropriation, or reconfiguration, of normative tropes." But she seems disappointed that the poets' imagery appears to reiterate familiar heterosexual codes, so that in the end, "there does not exist a truer, more 'lesbian' space in which they can escape the troubled dynamics of their

1. Hereafter, *L*.

relationship" (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 131–32, 137). She concludes that Swenson's manipulation of sexual imagery implies that that there is no such thing as an identity that is not ideologically saturated, and that any attempt to explicate or dislodge the mainstays of the dominant cultural codes will always be entangled in the very terms they work to subvert" (137). This is true. However, such an observation need not be an end but could rather be viewed as a beginning.

Judith Butler has pointed out as well that all identities are constructed through performativity, not as expressions of some essential being. Moreover, she says, these performances must endlessly be repeated, and, therefore, there will of necessity be gaps between these repetitions. It is precisely in these gaps that something new can be created. In essays such as "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" and "Critically Queer," Butler points to the possibility for a breaking or subversive repetition of gender style, sites for potential gender transformation. In other words, it is very true that lesbians neither live nor write in a pure space outside of culture. Therefore, lesbian gender and lesbian sexuality must play with and upon cultural definitions. This is exactly where queer comes in. The reconfiguration of normative tropes is what lesbians *do* to queer the space in which they live. There is parody, there is playfulness, as Zona, along with Sue Ellen Case in her well-known essay, "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," observe. There is also, potentially, transformation.

For example, when Zona looks at several of Swenson's love poems, she notes something that may well be "new": that some poems construct subjectivity as transitive, and that Swenson invokes identity at the "liminal site *between bodies*, between self and other . . . that marks her portrait of selfhood as contingent" in versions of identification (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 125). Such contingent or transitive subjectivity is not conventional; indeed, it may well have something to do with what I have termed "complementary identification"—a process where the play of difference and sameness in versions of identification becomes the hallmark of a lesbian sexuality and identity that is different from normative heterosexuality: one that can occur, I maintain, in those gaps of which Butler speaks (Juhasz, *A Desire for Women* 154).

In other words, when May Swenson moves her focus onto human lovers and their desire, the fluidity and shape-shifting that we have observed in other of her poems becomes yet more pronounced, as the lovers struggle as much as play with conventional gender and sexuality. We should not be surprised that metaphor again serves as the linguistic agent for these transfers.

"Facing" (*L* 21) is a poem about the relationship between desire, difference, and transitive subjectivity (Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson*) or complementary identification. It is a particularly helpful place to begin my exploration of the love poems, if only because it employs the visual patterns in which Swenson delighted, a form that "acts out" the theme of the poem. In this case, two lovers "face" one another on the page—lover number one speaks, lover number two responds, as two narratives line up beside one another. These lovers' interacting lyrics create complementary identification—an interchange of desire that is based in the play of difference and sameness—or, as Zona says, subjectivities that are transitive (metaphor's carrying across) (144). To accomplish this, traditional heterosexual gender and sexuality must be evoked, queer-ied, and played upon, so as to create an alternative space of desire. This space is probably lesbian, and it is decidedly queer. It is created in language.

These two lovers are *not* specifically gendered, but the poem speaks pointedly to gender's charge to dichotomize characteristics and qualities: sun/moon, day/night, light/dark, and, not surprisingly, active/passive. Lover number one, who speaks first, claims the passive side of the hyphen as she is discovered, charged, and brought into being by the other's light, eye, and power. At the same time, her poem begins with, "You I love," and ends with "do I move"—evocations of activity that rhyme and enforce one another with every word: "you," "do"; "I" "I"; love," "move." This interaction between passive and active underlies her love poem.

Lover number one identifies herself as the beloved, the one loved; but of course in the traditional love lyric, the one loved, the woman, does *not* speak at all. This in itself is a beginning of the subtle challenge to gender roles that the poem enacts. This beloved's litany of praise calls the other the *light* by which she is discovered, the *eye* that births her from anonymous night, the *face* that causes her to make her circle, the *body* that makes her glow, the *heat* that fires her so that her veins race. In this romantic blazon the speaker praises her lover's body parts and thereby demonstrates her responsive love. However, such praising is itself an action. More important, in the process of being acted upon, she becomes agential. She makes a circle, her veins race, and she moves in her path of being. Indeed, it is clear from the balancing of the opening "You I love" and the concluding "do I move" that loving, itself, is an act of moving.

I am not arguing that the speaker is *really* active and that the passivity is a pretense, or an affectation, because she is clearly influenced by her lover's love. What I suggest is that in this poem passivity is not truly inactive, and that activity is influenced by passivity: a gesture—entirely implicated

in love and desire—that both undermines the traditional dichotomy so deeply entrenched in gender definition and creates a relationship between the two lovers that is different from the traditional heterosexual pattern.

Across the page, lover number two—she of light, eye, and power—reveals herself as both a seer and someone seen. She is a constant mirror: always there to be looked into and to reflect—a faithful lover. Her goal is that her lover, who adores *her*, will adore herself, so that adoration will flow both ways, even as desire clearly does. She begins, "As you are sun to me / O I am moon to you." Traditionally, the moon is female, the sun is masculine, so the speaker is obliquely acknowledging her femaleness, even as, by finding light and sight in her lover, she sees the same power in the moon that the sun possesses. The speaker agrees with the dynamic that her beloved has established: I "give you substance / by my sight / and motion and radiance." But she adds a few twists. "By my pull / are you waked / to know that you are beautiful." She is praising the other as much as the other praised her.

She sees her lover's beauty, luster, and passion. Her own desire releases these qualities and is fired by them. Her litany of love concludes:

> So with love's light
> I sculpture you
> and in my constant mirror keep
> your portrait
> that you may adore
> yourself as I do.

The overt references to art—this speaker makes her lover's portrait, and where else but in verse?—cannot help but remind us of the traditional ending of many sonnets, such as Shakespeare's, where it is always he, the poet, who will ensure her immortality (and bright shining) by way of his black ink. In Swenson's poem each speaker gives the other the power to construct love's immortality, and they do so by creating and being created: tossing the roles of active and passive back and forth to construct identities that are complementary.

Other love poems repeat this pattern both more emphatically and with subtle changes that underline the nature of desire. For example, the poem "You Are" (*L* 41–44) revives the action and images of seeing and seen—"you are my mirror / in your eye's well I float / my reality proven"—to maintain that "no one / can be sure / by himself / of his own being." The poem ends:

my eye is a mirror
in which you float
a well where you dwell smiling . . .

I enfold you
and secrete the liquid
of your being
in that I love you
and you live *in* me

Here the interchange of roles is more obvious. First one is the mirror, then the other; but the point is the same: relationality is necessary for identity, and each lover both takes and gives to create it: "each according to the other," as she says earlier. Further, the phrase, "secrete the liquid / of your being," which transpires as one lover enfolds the other, invokes the transfer of both fluids and spirit. It is a metaphor for desire, in all of its many meanings.

The feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, who is a postmodern theorist but not a queer theorist, has introduced an idea about identity formation which is particularly relevant to my concept of complementary identification and to Swenson's poems. In *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin says that "recognition" is the source for coming into identity: this occurs when one person—in the beginning, the mother—(hopefully) sees/understands the self of the other. She writes, "A person comes to feel that 'I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,' by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence. Recognition is the essential response, the constant companion of assertion . . . it includes not only the other's confirming response, but how we find ourselves in that response" (21). "Facing" is surely a poem that enacts this kind of recognition. For Benjamin mutual recognition is the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other. We actually have a need, she writes, "to recognize the other as a person who is like us but distinct" (23). No simple enterprise, mutual recognition "is as significant a developmental goal as separation" (24).

Swenson's mirroring lovers offer recognition to one another, and for her *like but distinct* is always at issue. In "The Kiss" (*L* 86) she writes:

To match as mittens do
identical and different

Master and mistress each
then I will *be* you and bee you

In membranes locked
a peach and peach
would sip each other

How could this not be a lesbian poem? A peach and a peach want to sip one another. Same-and-different is the key to recognition and to lesbian desire. Sameness is exciting—two peaches, but the difference always there between any two people is also there when two people have similar bodies. Lesbian butch and femme play on this difference, using gender stereotypes to create another way to perform masculinity or femininity that we can call queer, as Case has observed. "Master and mistress *each*" (my emphasis). To "*be*" you and to "bee" you is the crux of the matter: the first *be* implies sameness, but the second points to the activity of one (a *bee*) sucking upon the receptive other: two, not one. Two who identify with one another in a complementary (give and take) manner and, in the process, help to bring one another's self or identity into being. A transitive act, as Zona would say.

Once we are alerted to the ways in which lesbian desire, sexuality, and identity are poetically represented through this play between like and difference, "masculine" and "feminine" —where I emphatically put these words and concepts in quotation marks—we can see its markers everywhere in Swenson's love poems. Human you-and-I poems, indeed! What is queer about lesbian gender and sexuality are the ways in which they use slippage, destabilization, gaps, resonances, and possibilities to construct identities that, as I have said earlier, shift, change, and interact; in these ways they attain forms that query and subvert conventional definitions to reveal something that often exists outside of culture's representational frames.

In one of Swenson's most famous love poems, "A Trellis for R" the sexual act itself is poetically created by making on the page a trellis, or arbor, of blue flowers and roses.

B
L
U
E but you are R
o
s
e too
(*L* 76)

This is how the trellis begins.

R
o
s
e you are B
l
u
e.

This is the end of the trellis. In this poem blue/rose is the dichotomy which is constantly traversed, for if the shape of the poem imitates the look of a nicely constructed trellis, it also is in constant motion on the page, to and fro, even as the lovers are also in constant motion. The speaker/lover is doing a lot of the kissing, sinking, sucking, tonguing, and "milknipping," while the beloved's hair glints and shoots, her eyelids close and unclose, and her nipples stiffen. By the end, the beloved's body is indeed a thing of fluid movement:

your hair's wild straw splash
silk spools for your ears.
But where white spouts out spills

on your brow to clear
eyepools wheel shafts of light

These pools and spouts recall earlier moments in the poem in which intimate body parts are adoringly described and made love to. Always, blue shifts to rose, rose shifts to blue. The beloved's eyes have glazed iris roses, her lids unclose to blue; her breasts are blue-skinned blown roses. Such a poem recalls others that I have discussed earlier, where humans and the natural world find their definition through ceaseless metaphoric transfer and interaction. Blue/rose relationality is emblematic of the process of identity formation that is Swenson's signature. Indeed, its use of colors makes a very specific point: on the color wheel, blue and red are distinctive yet indubitably related to one another in a manner that is not static.

What do we know, what do we get, when we see May Swenson as a practitioner of queer poetics? To begin, we see a way to understand how her poetic language, so lush with its metaphoric transfers, gives us a world in which "unconceived fluidities and agitations" create experience. We see gaps, resonances, possibilities that forever push against and past conventional naming and defining. We see how the identity of one thing

or another comes into being through its connections and jostlings and relations with some other thing. Indeed, we see how this space between them, continually formed and reformed, makes boundaries liminal and potential.

In the matter of genders and sexualities, Swenson's queer poetics invite us to see how the patterns of a conventional, normative culture *can* be challenged by way of the play between what is expected and what is possible. Swenson's lovers are often represented as women, but always they occupy gendered positions that are transgressive. Altering the traditional boundaries between genders—in particular, along the active/passive scale—enables her to consider desire itself as sparked by and encouraging of the samenesses and differences that these unconventional genders emanate. Swenson's poetics—her practice and philosophy of language in poems—makes possible the representation of desire that is intense, playful, exuberant, lavish, and definitely queer.

"Question" and More Questions

Two Shells for May Swenson

Mark Doty

The southern barrier island where I'm living this winter is a good place for finding shells. Some days, at the base of the swell of sand where the tide's been busy washing the island away, there are dense patches of them: orangey scallops; oysters in cream, white and charcoal; and my favorite, the black whelks, whorled things that look like they're made of lava. The whelks are seldom whole—they must take a beating on their way to shore—and often they are reduced to the slim spike of the shell's core. Where once there was an elaborate architecture, the shell curving inward into its labyrinthine recesses, now all that's left is the twisting center. At the top remains evidence of the many spiraling rooms; it's like looking into a partly demolished building where the walls were torn away and you can see into the old chambers of apartments. Then the stalk tapers down, twisting to a near dagger-point at the tip. The whole thing resembles some strange Victorian hatpin, or a Viennese art-nouveau tree, or what would have resulted if Rodin had sculpted Loie Fuller dancing in her veils.

I watch myself write that description; I wanted to begin with a sense of spareness, to evoke the lean, abstracted form of the shell, but as soon as I look closely at it—this spiral, unlikely thing resting on my desk right now—my language immediately begins to expand, to reach for metaphoric equivalents. That's my wont, my turn of mind—as if what the pressure of attention produces are sketches, verbal attempts to render aspects of the world, and no one attempt will suffice. It takes a raft of tropes

(demolition, hatpin, tree, dance of the veils) to catch something of the texture of reality. Temperamentally inclined to fullness, I am intrigued by the spare, the pared away, in the way that people who live in cluttered houses look with envy at the sleek modern interiors in design magazines; I admire it, but I doubt I could ever do it.

And therefore I am all the more intrigued by the sheer, elemental quality of Swenson's "Question," which seems itself to have been tumbled down to its core, worn away to a spine of meaning.

> Body my house
> my horse my hound
> what will I do
> when you are fallen
>
> Where will I sleep
> How will I ride
> What will I hunt
>
> Where can I go
> without my mount
> all eager and quick
> How will I know
> in thicket ahead
> is danger or treasure
> when Body my good
> bright dog is dead
>
> How will it be
> to lie in the sky
> without roof or door
> and wind for an eye
>
> With cloud for shift
> how will I hide?
> (*Nature* 45)

That penultimate stanza seems to describe almost exactly what's happened to my shell. Roof and door have been sanded away, wind blows right through the opened eye socket, there is no more protection offered by the house, only this spare, sculptural spine around which a body once resided.

Maybe the first thing to notice in May Swenson's elegant little song

is the swiftness of its opening. "Body my house"—no introductory warm up here, and no punctuation either, just three words telegraphing a metaphor as unornamented as an equation. The image is ancient and somehow comfortable: the flesh as the well-fitting shell of the self, soul's habitation, mind's dwelling place. This idea of the self as the body's occupant is immediately extended and complicated by the next line. If I have a horse and a hound and a house, then I'm a rider and a hunter, presumably, even perhaps a sort of lord of the manor? I have chattel and agency; I have animal assistants to do my bidding and perform the tasks I assign.

But it's rather odd that the poem isn't just describing the body, but actively addressing it. Swenson's poem is so confident that we don't think at first about the strangeness of this, but in truth when do you ever directly speak to your own body, as if it were an independent being? Renaissance poets used to do so, in dialogues between soul and body, or between profane and sacred aspects of the self. But here only the "I"—the questioning subjectivity, the anxious self—sings to the flesh, in what's both a love poem and, only three lines in, already a lament. "I" speaks with love and fear because she depends on these agents. If they are, in fact, external, then what and where and how will she be when they're gone?

What and *where* and *how*: the poem turns on the repetition of these terms of questioning; interestingly, *when* is never a question here, but a given: the horse will fall, the "good bright dog" of the body will, sometime, be dead. What, where, and how begin each new sentence but the final one and give the poem its feeling of driving forwardness, the hurrying motion of running animals. If I isolate them from the rest of the poem, they make for an urgent litany of yearning:

where
how
what
where
how
how
how

How, how, how: the last three questions drum their stunned insistence. *How* can it be that I will die? And how, how, how is it, to be disembodied, to be unhoused in the sky?

One of the things that makes Swenson's poem feel songlike is the shadow of traditional form ghosting behind it. That opening quatrain

feels very complete and sounds like the beginning of some old ballad. Modern poet that she is, Swenson leaves this foursquare sense of completion behind in the next stanza, and then stanza three feels like two quatrains run together—a feeling that's heightened because that third stanza offers us such clear, firm rhymes: *go* and *know*, *ahead* and *dead*. Of course we're meant to hear them, just as we notice that stanza four's another rhyming quatrain nailed to the page with the insistent rhyme of *sky* and *eye*. But the song can't be completed, not quite, because the singer has no answer for her question; the poem ends with a formal fragment, just two lines, heightened by reversing the usual order of syntax. You can hear how flat the poem would be if it ended "How will I hide / with cloud for shift?" We need that rhyme in the last place for the poem to feel formally resolved.

But there is more up Swenson's sleeve. (She is a sly poet, so there nearly always is.) The careful placement of two end words, *shift* and *hide*, calls a great deal of attention to them and invites us to consider them closely.

Shift introduces a new metaphoric term for the body; so far in this poem we've not thought of the flesh as clothing, but now we're asked to think of the speaker as naked, exposed, without her costume of skin. To lose one's clothes, of course, is not nearly as much a catastrophe as to lose one's house or horse or dog—nakedness is a far more familiar condition than homelessness or powerlessness. She's shown real affection for the body "all eager and quick" and "good bright dog"—but there isn't a sense that these elements *are* the self; they are its brave lieutenants. And we can't really read this simple and beautiful line—"with cloud for shift"—without thinking about the other meaning of *shift*, since the poem is indeed a contemplation of change, of the prospect of shifting states of being, from embodied to disembodied, clothed to nude. To be a naked element of sky, a participant in atmosphere, unmediated by external agents—is that such a bad thing? Without your clothes, you can't hide, but perhaps it is a pleasure, a boon, to be unhidden.

Swenson doesn't know the answer, of course; that's why the poem bears this title. And she engineers a very subtle, formal indication that ambivalence lies at the poem's core. The poem is primarily composed of four-syllable lines, which account for its quick, hoofbeat quality. There are five-syllable lines scattered throughout, but there is only one six-syllable one. A poem's longest line is often a kind of flag the poet has placed, a sign that *here* is the crux of the matter. And the longest line in "Question" is: "is danger or treasure."

Of course it refers, specifically, to the body's ability to locate trouble or reward, but I'd suggest it also points to the deep question fueling the poem. If the self is something housed in the body, clothed by it, what will it mean for us to be free of such disguise and restraint?

All the work of pointing toward meaning that is usually performed by commas and periods and their kin is here enacted by line-making, by syntax, and by an occasional capital letter to show us where a new unit of thought begins. There is one mark of punctuation in the whole poem, in the very final position. One thing this accomplishes is to send us back to the poem's title—back to the beginning, to reread, to try to understand where, and how, this strange little song has taken us.

But it also suggests, subtly, that there is just one question here; the poem, after all, isn't called "Questions." There is one consideration at its core: what is the self, where is it? Is it a good thing for that self to be hidden in the body? And that day when it will no longer be sequestered, but will be naked to the winds: should we look to that as a wonderful end or a terrifying exposure? Freed of the flesh, are we liberated or merely exposed?

Yesterday the sun was diffused through a thin fog, a vapor so suffusing the atmosphere that I can't find a noun for it. Not a glaze or a haze or a scrim, but a kind of dispersion that seemed, finally, like a thickening of the light. It was so bright I had to shield my eyes from the sea, while I walked for a warm hour between storms. The tide had kicked up new shells. Among them, a second core of a whelk, but entirely different. The one I described above was reduced to something as severe and lean as bone—but this new shell was all voluptuous curve, all cream and marble texture; the body it evokes is female, voluptuary, classical drapery over real hips and generous curves. And thus it is a shell for Swenson too.

Here she is, after all, in "On Handling Some Small Shells from the Windward Islands," celebrating the interiority of the shell, its perpetual coiling inward toward the unseeable.

> The curve and continuous
> spiral intrinsic, their
>
> role eternal inversion,
> the closed, undulant scroll.
> (*Nature*, 199)

What is sung here, of course, is the female body, the beautiful sense of curving inward toward a mystery, a hidden chamber. Later in the same poem the speaker's pleasure in the shells' evocation of female sexuality is made overt. The gathered shells are

> Peculiar fossil-
> fruits that suck through ribbed
>
> lips and gaping sutures
> into secret clefts
>
> the sweet wet with a tame taste.
> Vulviform creatures, or
>
> rather, their rocklike
> backs with labial bellies.
> (20)

That is a precise description of some particular marine creatures, but it is also undeniably sexy: *lips* and *gaping*, *secret clefts*, *sweet wet*—Swenson's clearly enjoying the eros of her game.

There is a decidedly playful quality to her evocations of the erotic body, a pleasure in speaking quite clearly while not seeming to do so at all; one can imagine the speaker of the poem above protesting with a smile that's she's only talking about shells, after all. This is the poet who, in a poem called "Her Early Work," complained about the poems she used to write by saying that "one could never tell who was addressed, or ever undressed"! The mature Swenson wants to be quite clear about the identity of the beloved, or at least the beloved's gender. Is it because she's still a woman of her generation (born in Utah, after all, in the early part of the twentieth century), or because she is simply too much a lover of metaphor, the allusive possibilities of the veil, that she prefers suggestive indirection to straightforwardness?

Here, for instance, is

> LITTLE LION FACE
>
> Little lion face
> I stooped to pick
> among the mass of thick
> succulent blooms, the twice
>
> streaked flanges of your silk
> sunwheel relaxed in wide

dilation, I brought inside,
placed in a vase. Milk

of your shaggy stem
sticky on my fingers, and
your barbs hooked to my hand,
sudden stings from them

were sweet. Now I'm bold
to touch your swollen neck,
put careful lips to slick
petals, snuff up gold

pollen in your navel cup.
Still fresh before night
I leave you, dawn's appetite
to renew our glide and suck.

An hour ahead of sun
I come to find you. You're
twisted shut as a burr,
neck drooped unconscious,

an inert, limp bundle,
a furled cocoon, your
sun-streaked aureole
eclipsed and dun.

Strange feral flower asleep
with flame-ruff wilted,
all magic halted,
a drink I pour, steep

in the glass for your
undulant stem to suck.
Oh, lift your young neck,
open and expand to your

lover, hot light.
Gold corona, widen to sky.
I hold you lion in my eye
sunup until night.

(*Complete Love Poems* 56–57)

Could there be a sexier flower in all of American poetry? For the first four stanzas, Swenson's game is to establish the poem's literal level—the picking of a dandelion—and to describe the act and flower with obvious sensual pleasure, a quality rendered in part by the rhymes' sensuous music (*pick/thick, silk/milk, wide/inside, neck/slick*) and in part by the sheer gorgeousness of phrasing; "the twice / streaked flanges of your silk / sunwheel relaxed in wide / dilation." To mouth just those twelve words, lips and tongue must move through three long *e*s, three long *i*s, one long *a*, as well as a series of *t*s, *k*s, and *d*s that seem to explode at the roof of the mouth and behind the teeth. The passage involves us physically in the sort of tongue and lip work the poem proposes. Consonance, assonance, sibilance: Swenson's indulgently pulled out the stops.

The sexual resonance of "relaxed in wide / dilation" can't be missed, and it seems to be Swenson's cue for the fifth stanza's admission of the nature of this metaphoric play. The gold pollen's resting in "your navel cup"; the body of the flower is double for another body. What's been implicit so far is suddenly explicit, underlined by "our glide and suck"—a pair of verbs difficult, even with some stretch of the imagination, to apply to the appreciation of flora.

Swenson could easily have underplayed the poem, focusing on vehicle rather than tenor, keeping the erotic implications as subtext. But "Little Lion Face" wants to break loose from the conceit that has generated it. Part of the piece's energy derives from the poet's pleasure in her own transparency. She not only allows us to see through her game but makes the game's *outrageousness* a good part of the point. Swenson is not only hiding in plain sight but *flaunting*, as they used to say, a celebration of sexual pleasure. Her conceit delights in dressing up her lover as a flower, only to delight further in stripping the costume away.

And yet this playful undressing is a way to pour enormous intensity into the emblem: "Oh, lift your young neck / open and expand to your / lover, hot light."

How much work that comma after "Oh" accomplishes! Rather than apostrophe, the word becomes an exclamation, a sexual sigh, the vowel-cry of desire, the *oh* of the overcome. Oh, y*ou*ng, *o*pen, y*ou*r, l*o*ver: the vowels say *O, uh, O, oo, O,* and the stanza break that interrupts their progression provides a moment of delicious hesitation. The poem's final verbs are *lift*, *open*, *expand*, *widen*, *hold*: Inside her metaphoric disguise—even though it is *barely* a disguise—Swenson is able to pour heat on the page, to be vulnerable, possessing, possessed.

"Little Lion Face" is a breathtaking performance on this bracing line

between directness and disguise. It's a poem about a dandelion, about a lion, about a lover, and these three elements remain in suspension, as it were. Swenson isn't interested in allowing the tenor to triumph over the vehicle, exactly; the dandelion does not exist here simply to illustrate the lovers' relationship, which is barely sketched, really—known to us *through* the veil of the comparison. Instead this is a kind of dynamic play that allows the relationship between vehicle and tenor to *remain* dynamic, in flux.

May Swenson must have been, of course, a shell collector, both because she lived by the sea, on Long Island, and because she was such a student of natural form, attendant to the structures the world presents and their possibilities for the poet. These two coiled metaphors on my desk—body as spare revenant, as conundrum, hollowed out thing, and body as coiled voluptuary, sensuous container—I am keeping these shells for her.

And holding them beside these two poems—my own dynamic interplay of vehicle and tenor!—I see that I oversimplify in keeping them separate. Reading "Little Lion Face" causes me to reconsider the role of eros in "Question," with its rhetoric of master/mistress and servant, the beast-energy of the body. Do we know for certain that the body being addressed is the speaker's body, after all? What if she were speaking to someone else? I don't think that's the poem's primary sense, but it doesn't exclude that reading either; "Little Lion Face" teaches us to keep things open, not draw those lines of metaphoric equivalence too tightly.

And by the same token, "Little Lion Face," read through "Question," deepens and darkens too—isn't mortality and evanescence just around the corner in any love poem? There's a sort of diminishment at the poem's center, a near-death, when the little flower is

> an inert, limp bundle,
> a furled cocoon, your
> sun-streaked aureole
> eclipsed and dun.

Now the "flame-ruff" is wilted, and "all magic halted." It's a moment anticipatory of that kernel of loss around which desire and affection are built; it points to the fate of the body that "Question" so nakedly considers, but here gives that fate the sweet clothing of desired flesh.

Swenson is an inclusive recorder, an attendant to reality—less the purist and perfectionist, more interested in the seismographic recording of the nuances of perception and feeling, the daily, observant, penetrating

eye. Thus she studies the nuances of physicality with a remarkable boldness and range. There is a phenomenology of embodiment to be written about her work. She is as likely to celebrate the flesh as she is to seem troubled or even revolted by it; what other woman of her generation—what other *poet* of her generation—was so attentive to the inscription of the body?

Bibliography of the Works of May Swenson

Prepared by Alice Geffen
Edited and updated by Maure Lyn Smith

Introduction

Carole Berglie

Alice Geffen met May Swenson on April 21, 1975, when both attended "Author Appreciation Day," a reception at the Sea Cliff Library, on Long Island, to honor local writers. May was probably the town's most famous writer. Alice had just opened The Main Street Bookstore in nearby Roslyn village, and Harper & Row had recently published her facsimile edition of Lydia Maria Child's *American Frugal Housewife*, so the conversation no doubt touched on the vicissitudes of publishing and the challenges of selling poetry. As a lover of poetry, Alice could not have been more thrilled to meet a poet whose work she so admired. She had stocked her store with poetry books and had made a point of carrying the works of local authors.

Not long after their meeting, May invited Alice and me to drive her to Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge. (May couldn't drive.) We walked the trail around the West Pond with one pair of binoculars among us, adjusting the focus three times for each bird we encountered. May pointed to a shorebird in the distance, saying, "There's a solitary sandpiper." Unaware that May was naming the species of shorebird, Alice turned to me, commenting that only a poet would describe a bird in such beautiful, simple terms.

The friendship between May Swenson and Alice Geffen grew over the years, built on the cornerstones of a love of poetry, a fondness for living in Sea Cliff, the enjoyment of watching birds, and their spirited competition in chess. Alice and May would spend afternoons playing chess at 73 The Boulevard, and there were many nights that May joined us for dinner at our house on Highland Avenue. We would sometimes drive May to a local movie or a poetry reading in New York City; other times we took her with us to the grocery store in Glen Cove. Most were ordinary, everyday activities that neighbors do all the time. One morning we drove to a farm a little way out on Long Island to pick strawberries. On the way back home, May was unusually quiet as she sat in the backseat of the car. That afternoon, Alice and I made lots of strawberry jam, and May wrote "Strawberrying."

> We're picking near the shore, the morning
> sunny, a slight wind moving rough-veined leaves
> our hands rumple among. Fingers find by feel
> the ready fruit in clusters. Here and there,
> their squishy wounds. . . . Flesh was perfect
> yesterday. . . . June was for gorging. . . .
> (*In Other Words* 8)

Alice came from a literary and artistic family: her uncle Matthew Josephson was the author of *The Robber Barons* and *The Money Lords*, two books about the Gilded Age, as well as of at least a dozen biographies of leading Americans. Her aunt Felicia Geffen was executive secretary at the American Academy of Arts and Letters and her aunt Beth was the librarian there. Her cousin was James Levine, artistic director and conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, and her sister Joy Geffen had traveled with the USO during WWII, later becoming a well-known actress in New York City.

As a high school student, Alice attended the Stockbridge School in Massachusetts, then Carnegie Technical Institute in Pittsburgh, but soon left to pursue other interests. After several years working in and managing various bookstores in New York City, Alice finished her bachelor's degree at Hofstra University on Long Island and began master's degree work in American studies at New York University. Her mother's death caused her to shift gears again; she bought a house in Sea Cliff and opened a bookstore in the next town.

Whether as a student or a purveyor of literature, Alice read both

classic and contemporary writers. She kept current with developments in the theatre and movies, and she traveled widely in search of birds. She especially credited May Swenson with encouraging her development as a naturalist-travel writer; Alice wrote three more books and many magazine articles that helped promote ecotourism and nature travel. Mostly she enjoyed talking about the fiction she was reading and the poems she especially liked—with May's poems topping that list. The work that Alice Geffen did on this bibliography is testament to their close friendship and her continuing support of May Swenson's poetry.

May's correspondence with Alice is part of the Swenson holdings at Washington University's Olin Library in St. Louis. In these many postcards and long letters, reflecting more than twenty-five years of friendship, May is playful, making word jokes, games, and puzzles (they shared a love of games); she sometimes signed her letters "From the Junkie Mungle," a reference to Florida's Monkey Jungle. She sent limericks like

> There was a young man named Denis
> Who went to play tennis in Venice
> Which he did with a bounce
> But he couldn't pronounce
> And would say "I've a very large penis."

May reported the birds she had seen and the side trips she had taken. She also wrote about her editors, her poems to be published, her upcoming readings. She worried about her house in Sea Cliff—whether the pipes had frozen or the roof had leaked—and she spoke about her health, including her frustration with losing her sense of smell. But mostly their news-filled correspondence was peppered with humor and response. Alice described a Christmas gift she received from a friend, "Mickey made me the most wonderful pillow: it's two moose mooning in a marsh in the woods"; May replied with:

> Two moose mooning in a marsh in the woods
> must mean more than at first appears.
> Many mottled mangos mashed within their mouths
> might indicate a morbid reason for their tears.
>
> Moose mainly meander into marshes when confused
> and munch on mint or mistletoe or other freaky fruit
> moodily moping, never giggling or amused.
> Some mimic the mandolin or mouth organ or flute.

> Two Sioux sunning on the sward in the snow
> swinging skillets, smiling, should set your heart aglow
> But two moose mooning in a marsh in the woods
> must be murky omens and up to no goods.

I have no information on exactly when Alice began writing this bibliography, but it was several years before May died. There is no doubt she worked on it with May's help and approval, and that she compiled some of the information from May's own files. Alice lived almost ten years beyond May, but she knew well that she had lost her close friend and beloved poet. Publishing this bibliography is a fine tribute for both of them.

Section I—Books in Chronological Order

Swenson, May. "Another Animal: Poems." *Poets of Today.* Introduction by John Hall Wheelock. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954. 103–79.
———. *A Cage of Spines*. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1958.
———. *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.
———. *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*. 2nd ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964.
———. *Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Son's, 1966.
———. *Half Sun Half Sleep: New Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.
———. *Iconographs: Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.
———. *More Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.
———. *The Guess & Spell Coloring Book*. Drawings by Lise Gladstone. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.
———. *New & Selected Things Taking Place*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.
———. *In Other Words: New Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
———. *The Love Poems*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991.
———. *The Complete Poems to Solve*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.
———. *Nature: Poems Old and New*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
———. *May Out West: Poems of May Swenson*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.
———. *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000.
———. *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Section II—Books in Chronological Order with Content Lists

Swenson, May. "Another Animal: Poems." *Poets of Today.* Introduction by John Hall Wheelock. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954. 103–79.

Contents:

One

Feel Like a Bird
Horse and Swan Feeding
Lion
Sun
Stony Beach
Sketch for –a Landscape
Café Tableau
The Drunkard's Brow
Spring in the Square
Boy in Canoe
The Garden at St. John's
Horses in Central Park
Three Jet Planes

Two

Evolution
Beast
Organelle
Love Is
Mornings Innocent
He That None Can Capture/comes of own accord to me
Each Day of Summer
August Night
Another Animal
To Confirm a Thing
A History of Love

Three

Secure
The Key to Everything
The Tiger's Ghost
An Unknown Island
Mortal Surge
Satanic Form
A Loaf of Time
Why We Die
Question
I Will Lie Down
The Greater Whiteness
A Wish

Four

Any Object
Organs
Big-Hipped Nature
The Playhouse
The Shadow-Maker
By Morning
Sunset
Cumuli
A Day is Laid By
Rusty Autumn
A Dream
Green Red Brown and White
Wingfolk
An Opening

———. *A Cage of Spines.* New York: Rinehart & Company, 1958.

Contents:

Part 1 The form is stone The dress is rain

Almanac
The Centaur
The Red Bird Tapestry
A Lake Scene
The Promontory Moment
Fountain Piece

The Wave the Flame the Cloud and the Leopard Speak to the Mind
The Engagement
In the Egyptian Room
The School of Desire
The Charm Box
Waiting for *It*
The Word "Beautiful"
The Poplar's Shadow
Cause and Effect
The Cloud-Mobile
Order of Diet
Zambesi and Ranee
The Legend of To Rise
Death Great Smoothener
Today in Winter's Town
The Properties

Part 2 Targets in the brain

At Breakfast
By Morning
Hypnotist
Was Worm
An Extremity
Am I Becoming?
Seven Natural Songs
Shadow-Maker
To Her Images (For I. M.)
Frontispiece
R. F. at Bread Loaf His Hand Against a Tree
Deciding
Two-Part Pear Able
Parade of Painters
The Process

Part 3 A health of yellow

Looking Uptown
Working on Wall Street
To the Statue
Ornamental Sketch with Verbs
At East River
Water Picture
Fountain Piece II
To the Shore
Early Morning: Cape Cod
The Tide at Long Point
The Even Sea
Sunday in the Country
Forest
A Haunted House
News from the Cabin
The Harp
Executions
The Day Moon
Spring Uncovered
Her Management

———. *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.

Contents:

To Mix With Time 1 "then i saw it flow"

The Universe
God
Out of My Head
The Wish to Escape into Inner Space
Downward
Let Us Prepare
Landing on the Moon
The Shape of Death
Each Like a Leaf
The Primitive
Night Practice
The Surface
How to Be Old

To Mix With Time 2 "touching his toe"

Death Invited
Instead of the Camargue
Fountains of Aix
The Alyscamps at Arles
Above the Arno
A Boy Looking at Big David

Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco
The Pantheon, Rome
Italian Sampler
While Sitting in the Tuileries and Facing the Slanting Sun
A Hurricane at Sea

To Mix With Time 3 "cubes and cones"

Snow in New York
From the Office Window
At the Museum of Modern Art
A Fixture
Riding the "A"
Pigeon Woman
Cat & the Weather
De Chirico: Superimposed Interiors
Southbound on the Freeway
When You Lie Down, the Sea Stands Up
The Contraption
Trinity Churchyard, Spring 1961
The Totem
Distance and a Certain Light

To Mix With Time 4 "colors take bodies"

The Snow Geese at Jamaica Bay
Living Tenderly
The Woods at Night
Another Spring Uncovered
One Morning in New Hampshire
A Couple
Japanese Breakfast
Seeing the Frog
Fireflies
The Crossing
The Exchange

from A Cage of Spines 1

Almanac
The Centaur
The Red Bird Tapestry
A Lake Scene
The Promontory Moment
Fountain Piece
The Wave the Flame the Cloud and the Leopard Speak to the Mind
The Engagement
The Charm Box
Waiting for *IT*
The Word "Beautiful"
The Poplar's Shadow
Order of Diet
Death, Great Smoothener

from A Cage of Spines 2 "riddling poems"

At Breakfast
By Morning
Hypnotist
Was Worm
An Extremity
Shadow-Maker
Seven Natural Songs
To Her Images
Frontispiece
Two-Part Pear Able
Deciding

from A Cage of Spines 3

Working on Wall Street
Looking Uptown
To the Statue
Water Picture
Ornamental Sketch with Verbs
Sunday in the Country
Forest
News From the Cabin
Early Morning: Cape Cod
The Tide at Long Point
Executions
The Day Moon
Spring Uncovered
Her Management

from Another Animal 1

Evolution
Love is
Mornings Innocent
He That None Can Capture comes of own accord to me
Another Animal
Organs
To Confirm a Thing
A Loaf of Time

Why We Die
Question
Mortal Surge
Satanic Form
The Greater Whiteness
A Wish
The Key to Everything
A Dream
Rusty Autumn
I Will Lie Down

FROM ANOTHER ANIMAL 2

Any Object
Feel Like a Bird
Horse and Swan Feeding
Lion
Sun
Stony Beach
Sketch for a Landscape
Café Tableau
The Garden at St. John's
Spring in the Square
Horses in Central Park
Boy in Canoe
The Playhouse
Big-Hipped Nature
Green Red Brown and White
An Opening

———. *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*. 2nd ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964. (Revised edition/second printing of *To Mix With Time*, 1964. Same contents and pagination, revisions noted.)

———. *Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Son's, 1966.

Contents:

A Clue or Two

SOME RIDDLE POEMS

At Breakfast
Was Worm
By Morning
Living Tenderly
Hypnotist
A Yellow Circle
An Extremity
Cardinal Ideograms
Southbound on the Freeway
7 Natural Songs
Japanese Breakfast
The Surface
Her Management

5 CAT POEMS, 4 BIRD POEMS, 3 SEA POEMS

Waiting for *IT*
Cat and the Weather
Drawing the Cat
His Secret
Forest
Fountain Piece
Feel Like a Bird
The Charm Box
The Woods at Night
The Tide at Long Point
The Wave and the Dune
When You Lie Down the Sea Stands Up

SOME OTHER POEMS TO FIND AND SOLVE

Green Red Brown and White
The Word "Beautiful"
Water Picture
The Cloud-Mobile
Question
The Wave the Flame the Cloud and the Leopard Speak to the Mind
3 Models of the Universe
Evolution
A Boy Looking at Big David
The Centaur

———. *Half Sun Half Sleep: New Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.

Contents:

Poems

After the Dentist
After the Flight of Ranger VII
All That Time
April Light
At First, At Last
At Truro
August 19, Pad 19
A Basin of Eggs
A Bird's Life
The Blindman
Cardinal Ideograms
Cause & Effect
A City Garden in April
Colors Without Objects
Dear Elizabeth
Drawing the Cat
11th Floor, West 4th Street
Fable for When There's No Way Out
Flag of Summer
Flying Home from Utah
Four-Word Lines
Gods | Children
Hearing the Wind at Night
His Suicide
In a Museum Cabinet
In the Hair of the Night
The Kite
The Lightning
The Little Rapids
More Rich
Motherhood
Naked in Borneo
Ocean Whale-Shaped
October Textures
Of Rounds
On Handling Some Small Shells from the Windward Islands
On Seeing Rocks Cropping out of a Hill in Central Park
Out of the Sea, Early
The People Wall
The Pregnant Dream
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Sightseeing in Provincetown
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Spectrum Analysis
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The Tall Figures of Giacometti
Things in Common
3 Models of the Universe
To Make a Play
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Waking from a Nap on the Beach
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Translations of Six Swedish Poets

Ingemar Gustafson, "Locked In."
———, "Under a Ramshackle Rainbow."
Werner Aspenström, "Winter Tale."
Eric Lindegren, "Pastoral Suite III."
———, "Icarus."
Gunnar Ekelöf, "Autumn Trance."
———, "Each Man Is A Universe."
Harry Martinson, "High View."
———, "Evening Inland."
Karin Boye, "On the Road."
———, "Yes It Hurts."

———. *Iconographs: Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

Contents:

Section One

Bleeding
Women
Things I Can Do In My Situation
Over The Field
Earth Will Not Let Go
The DNA Molecule
I Look At My Hand
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The Shape of Death
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Spring by Robert Lowell (Photograph by Trudi Fuller)
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Section Two

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2 The Blue Bottle
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Fire Island
Stone Gullets
Seeing Jupiter
Zero in the Cove
The Sunbird Settles To Its Nest
Rocky Point

A Note about *Iconographs*
About the Author

———. *More Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.

Contents:

Preface "A Poem Is a Thing"

1 Space and Flight Poems

After the Flight of Ranger 7
Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks From the Moon

First Walk on the Moon
Three Jet Planes
Over the Field
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4 Color and Sound Poems

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5 Creature Poems

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Camofleur
Geometrid
Catbird in Redbud
Unconscious Came a Beauty
Redundant Journey
Motherhood
A Bird's Life
News from the Cabin

———. *The Guess & Spell Coloring Book*. Drawings by Lise Gladstone. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.

Contents: 25 riddles about everyday objects, some rhyme, none are titled; there is no contents: page.

———. *New & Selected Things Taking Place*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.

Contents:

Things Taking Place I

A Navajo Blanket
Bison Crossing Near Mt. Rushmore
Speed
The North Rim
Camping in Madera Canyon
Bronco Busting, Event #1
St. Augustine-by-the-Sea
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O'Keeffe Retrospective
Poet to Tiger
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Holding the Towel
Analysis of Baseball
Watching the Jets Lose to Buffalo at Shea
Choosing Craft
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The Beauty of the Head
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View to the North
The Thickening Mat
Cold Colors
Captain Holm
Digging in the Garden of Age I Uncover a Live Root
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Survey of the Whole
The Solar Corona
First Walk on the Moon
"So Long" to the Moon from the Men of Apollo
The Pure Suit of Happiness
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The DNA Molecule (in paragraph format)
Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks From the Moon
Earth Will Not Let Go
Seeing Jupiter
I Look at My Hand
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Unconscious Came a Beauty
The Blue Bottle
How Everything Happens (Based On A Study Of The Wave)
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FROM HALF SUN HALF SLEEP

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The Tall Figures of Giacometti
All That Time
A City Garden in April
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Four-Word Lines
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Naked in Borneo (From a painting by Tobias)
The Pregnant Dream
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Cause & Effect
Fable for When There's No Way Out
While Seated in a Plane
Flying Home from Utah
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3 Models of the Universe
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After the Flight of Ranger VII
August 19, Pad 19
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The Secret in the Cat
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October Textures
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from To Mix With Time

Above the Arno
Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco
The Pantheon, Rome
Italian Sampler
Death Invited
Instead of the Camargue
Fountains of Aix
While Sitting in the Tuileries and Facing the Slanting Sun
A Hurricane at Sea
Snow in New York
Riding the "A"
A Fixture
The Contraption
At the Museum of Modern Art
Distance and a Certain Light
Pigeon Woman
Cat & the Weather
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Southbound on the Freeway
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The Wish to Escape into Inner Space
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Deciding
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Water Picture
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Mornings Innocent
He That None Can Capture
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Mortal Surge
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The Key to Everything
A Wish
A Dream
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The Greater Whiteness
I Will Lie Down
Rusty Autumn
Green Red Brown and White
An Opening

———. *In Other Words: New Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Contents:

ONE

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Waterbird
Three White Vases
Strawberrying
Blood Test
Birthday Bush
Under the Baby Blanket
Double Exposure
Dummy, 51, to Go to Museum
    Ventriloquist Dead at 75
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    Four (I missed the Third)—June 17, 1982
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Ahnighito
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Some Quadrangles

Four "Comics"

Innards
The Digital Wonder Watch
The Gay Life
Fit

Summer's Bounty
A Nosty Fright
Giraffe

Five

Banyan

———. *The Love Poems*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991.

Contents:

Four-Word Lines
Mornings Innocent
Swimmers
Early Morning: Cape Cod
One Morning in New Hampshire
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Night Before the Journey
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Neither Wanting More
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A Trellis for R.
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Dark Wild Honey
Cat and I
To Confirm a Thing
Good Things Come from Thee
Equilibrist

About the Poet

———. *The Complete Poems to Solve*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Contents:

A clue or two

Some riddle poems

At Breakfast
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Hypnotist
A Yellow Circle
An Extremity
Cardinal Ideograms
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Color and sound poems

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Creature poems

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Camoufleur
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Catbird in Redbud
Unconscious Came a Beauty
Redundant Journey
Motherhood
A Bird's Life
News from the Cabin

The Wonderful Pen

———. *Nature: Poems Old and New.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

Contents:

Foreword, by Susan Mitchell

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Living Tenderly
Untitled

A Day is Laid By
On Its Way
How to Be Old
View to the North
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Selves

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If I Had Children
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Love Sleeping
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This Morning
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Yes, the Mystery
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Dear Elizabeth
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Spring by Robert Lowell (Photograph by Trudi Fuller)
Picasso: "Dream." Oil. 1932.
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Incantation

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———. *May Out West: Poems of May Swenson*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.

Contents:

Above Bear Lake
The Centaur
Memory of the Future? Prophecy of the Past?
Beast
Something Goes By
Haymaking
White Mood
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Earth Your Dancing Place
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My Name Was Called
A Day Is Laid By
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Index of Dates

———. *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000.

Contents:

Poems

Her Early Work
From a Letter to Elizabeth Bishop
Dear Elizabeth
Somebody Who's Somebody
In the Bodies of Words

Letters

August 14, 1958
January 10, 1960
November 14, 1962

Afterword "Urged by the 'Unknown You': May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop." By Kirstin Hotelling Zona

———. *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Contents:

Foreword, by Maxine Kumin

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Section III—Books Edited or Translated by May Swenson

Knudson, R. Rozanne and May Swenson, eds. *American Sports Poems Selected by R. R. Knudson and May Swenson*. New York: Orchard Books, 1988.
An anthology of poems, including four previously published by May Swenson:
Analysis of Baseball
Watching the Jets Lose to Buffalo at Shea
Choosing Craft
Bronco Busting, Event #1

Tranströmer, Tomas. *Windows & Stones Selected Poems*. Trans. May Swenson, with Leif Sjoberg. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

Section IV—Chronological Listing of Short Stories, Essays, Plays, and Other Prose Works

"Mirror." *The Scribble* 8.2 (1933): 4.

"Appearances." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 13 (1951): 69–82.

"Mutterings of a Middlewoman." *Discovery* 5 (1955): 96–118.

"Mutterings of a Middlewoman." 1955. *The Poet's Story*. Ed. Howard Moss. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973. 229–44.

"An Eclogue." *Paris Review* 10 (1955): 97–103. Reprinted as "The Power and the Danger." *Women: Feminist Stories by Nine New Authors*. New York: The Eakins Press, 1972. 81–92.

"On Richard Wilbur's 'Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.'" *Berkeley Review* 3 (1957): 42. Reprinted in *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic*. Ed. Anthony Ostroff. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964. 12–16.

"Milton Avery—A Sampling of His Oils Since 1950." *Arts Yearbook 3: Paris/ New York*. New York: Arts Digest, Inc., 1959. 108–12.

Introduction. *Spoon River Anthology*. By Edgar Lee Masters. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962. 5–13.

"A Matter of Diction." *Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy-Seventh Birthday*. Ed. Tambimuttu. New York: Tambimuttu & Mass, 1964. 45–49. Also published in *Poetry London-New York*. November, 1964. 44–49.

"The Poet as Anti-Specialist." *The Saturday Review* 30 January 1965: 16+.

"The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age." *Poets on Poetry*. Ed. Howard Nemerov. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966. 127–59.

"The Floor: A Play in One Act." *First Stage* 6.2 (1967): 112–16. First produced 11–25 May, 1966 at the American Place Theatre, New York City. Program title was *Doubles and Opposites*, directed by Harvey Grossman; starring David Kaufmann and Eddie Roll; scenery, costumes, and lighting by Eugene Gurlitz.

Preface. *Windows & Stones Selected Poems*. By Tomas Tranströmer. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

"Breakfast Bowl." *John Keats's Porridge: Favorite Recipes of American Poets*. Ed. Victoria McCabe. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975. 95–96.

"Big My Secret, But It's Bandaged." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 12.2 and 13.1 Double Issue (1985): 16–44. Essay on Emily Dickinson, delivered April 5, 1984, at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City, under the auspices of The Academy of American Poets.

Section V—Chronological Listing of Poems in Periodicals

1932

"Three Hues of Melody." *The Scribble* 7.2 (1932): 17.
"Discord." *The Scribble* 8.1 (1932): 8.
"Fruits." *The Scribble* 8.1 (1932): 18.

1934

"Compromise." *Utah Sings* 1 (1934): 274–75.
"First Star." *Utah Sings* 1 (1934): 275.
"Creation." *Utah Sings* 1 (1934): 275.

1935

"First Sleeper." *The Scribble* Winter 1935: 8.
"Morning." *The Scribble* Winter 1935: 8.

1937

"Music Maker." *Intermountain Review* 1 Feb. 1937: 5.
"Like Thee, Falcon." *Intermountain Review* 1 Mar. 1937: 5.

1938

"Haymaking." *Rocky Mountain Review* 3.2 (1938–39): 7.

1949

"Love Is." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 11 (1949): 335.
"Sun." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 11 (1949): 336.
"Café Tableau." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 11 (1949): 337.
"The Key to Everything." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 11 (1949): 338–39.
"Hand Better Than a Wing?" *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 11 (1949): 339–40. (Revised and collected as "Feel Like a Bird.")
"Haymaking." *The Saturday Review of Literature* 20 Aug. 1949: 24.

1950

"He That None Can Capture." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 522.
"The Drunkard's Brow." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 523.
"In a Mirror." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 524. (First published under title "Surrealist" in *Seventeen and One*. New York; B. Fitzgerald, 1943.)
"We Are Eager/ We Pant." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 524–26. (Revised and collected as "Mortal Surge.")
"Why We Die." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 526–27.
"I Will Lie Down in Autumn." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 12 (1950): 527.
"Goodnight." *The Saturday Review of Literature* 21 Jan. 1950: 5.
"Compromise." *Dallas Times-Herald* 2 Apr. 1950: ___.
"Nightly Vision." *Dallas Times-Herald* 30 Apr. 1950: ___.
"A Day Is Laid By." *Tomorrow* 9 (1950): 46.

"War Summer." *Survival* 1 (1950): 46.
"Lion." *Poetry New York* 4 (1950): 13.
"Evening Star." *Dallas Times-Herald* 17 Dec. 1950.

1951

"Green Red Brown and White." *Poetry* Jan. 1951: 198–99.
"Why We Die." *Dallas Times-Herald* 14 Jan. 1951.
"An Unknown Island." *The Western Review* 15.3 (1951): 182–83.
"Each Day of Summer." *The Western Review* 15.3 (1951): 183.
"The Bough in Spring." *Dallas Times-Herald* 20 May 1951.
"Equilibrist." *Dallas Times-Herald* 1 July 1951.
"Only Hurt Can Heal Me." *Dallas Times-Herald* 21 Sept. 1951.
"Sketch for a Landscape." *Partisan Review* 18.5 (1951): 539.
"Lion." *Poetry New York* 4 (1951): 13.

1952

"At the Ballet." *Contemporary Poetry* 12 (1952): 15–16.
"Thing and Image." *Contemporary Poetry* 12 (1952): 17.
"Sunset." *Accent* 12.1 (1952): 62.
"Seven Natural Songs." *Epoch* 4.1 (1952): 16–17.
"Rusty Autumn." *Epoch* 4.1 (1952): 17.
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Section VI—Recordings

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